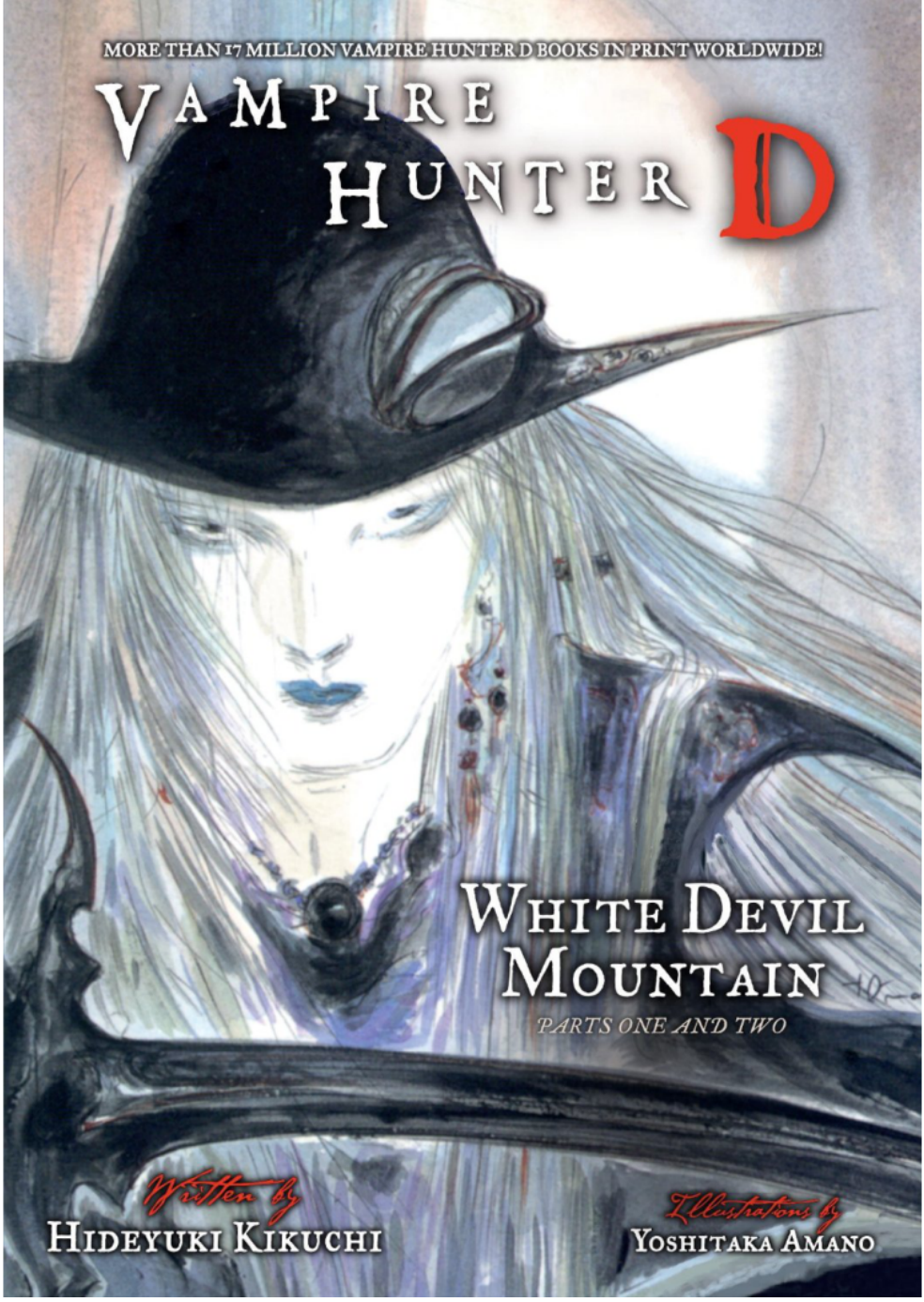
MORE THAN 17 MILLION VAMPIRE HUNTER D BOOKS IN PRINT WORLDWIDE!
VAMPIRE HUNTER D
WHITE DEVIL MOUNTAIN
PARTS ONE AND TWO
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VOLUME 22

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

White Devil Mountain

PART ONE

At the Foot of the White Mountain

chapter 1

I

Whiteness dominated their entire field of view. Moreover, they were being madly tossed by seemingly impossible turbulence, which had left the aircraft groaning for the last thirty minutes.

"This is bad! If we don't lose some altitude, she'll never hold together!" the pilot said, taking the cheap cigarette he'd long since smoked down to the filter and crushing it against the floor before grabbing the yoke again.

Suddenly, the door behind him opened. The pilot clucked his tongue. Leave it to the most worthless guy he knew to show up at absolutely the worst time. Of course, there was no one else riding with them besides the guy in the coffin. The man had just stepped through the doorway when the aircraft lurched wildly to the right. More than the screams of the pest clinging to the door, it was the creaking coming from the aircraft's panels that concerned the pilot.

"Hold on tight. I'm taking her into a dive!" the pilot shouted without bothering to turn around. He rapidly pushed the yoke farther and farther forward.

"Wh-wh-wh-what the hell is going on?" the pest asked, his teeth chattering.

"Damned if I know," the pilot replied while desperately working the yoke. Half of his remark was him trying to put a scare into the man, but the other half was serious. It was too late to escape the turbulence, the aircraft's screams were telling him. "Well, if we're lucky we'll pull a crash landing in the mountains, but if we're out of luck we'll break apart in midair. Hell, this crate wasn't built for flying this time of year."

"And you were paid a good sum on account of that. You're in no position to complain about it now. You knew that before you took off."

"Yeah, whatever. You're right about that, egghead. But us fliers are a superstitious lot. We're carrying that coffin—and if we go down, I'm blaming it on what's inside it."

"That alone will be saved!" the spindly pest—the archaeologist Geeson—shouted angrily. He was so determined, it moved the pilot for a moment. "Any researcher of Nobility on the planet would give their life or soul for a look at what's inside. I don't care if we end up smashed to pieces—we've got to get it safely to the Capital."

"In that case, why didn't you use the highways?" the pilot shot back. He focused his attention on the stark scene outside his windows, but he immediately turned back to the aged archaeologist. He'd felt a weird presence. Some part of the aircraft was groaning horribly—the panels that always worried him.

The face of the gray-haired and gray-bearded archaeologist in his midfifties had become a rictus.

"Why . . ." the man began in a voice like a specter. "Why . . . did you ask?"

"Huh?"

In front of the wide-eyed pilot, the scrawny, crane-like face cocked at an angle.

"Why . . . did you ask . . . such a thing? Oh, I hadn't given it any thought . . . but now I'm forced . . . to answer . . . what shouldn't be said."

The man's voice was joined by the brief sound of a signal. A radar warning.

The pilot turned his eyes forward again in regret. From the far reaches of that world of white, an even whiter shape was approaching. A mountain.

Given our location, that'd have to be Mount Shilla, wouldn't it? he thought. *Fuck! I'm not doing any damned emergency landing. I'd rather cut my heart out right now than try to survive up on that mountain.*

Setting the fuel pumps to their maximum output, he focused his attention on the radar screen.

Altitude: thirty thousand feet—damn it, we've dropped too much. Gotta pull it back up soon.

As he shouted at the pest to get out of there, he heard the man cry out, "At first . . . it was my intent . . . to transport it via the Ghost Highway . . . But . . . there wasn't time for that . . . No, that's not right . . . Someone . . . ordered me . . . to go by air."

The yoke wouldn't move. Part of the problem was mechanical—the other part was that the pilot's hands were frozen, so unsettled was he by the egghead's tone.

"Who was it?"

In the distance, he heard a hard, rattling sound. The body of the aircraft told him they were losing altitude with ever-increasing speed, even without him touching the controls.

"Flaps down. Maintain oil pressure. Pulling her nose up."

His words overlapped with another hard clank.

"The chains . . . are off," the archaeologist said behind him, his hoarse voice trembling.

"So, what am I supposed to do about it? Damn it, grab hold of something! You'll get tossed in the air!"

Bam! A terrific change in air pressure hit them head-on. The diving

aircraft started leveling out.

"This can't be . . . How could the chains come off?" the archaeologist said in a crumpled little tone. The sudden g-forces he'd experienced had left his body sore. Yet his voice carried a different fear.

In the pilot's field of view, the fuel gauge lit up.

"Shit, it's at zero. Did we have a leak? We had plenty of fuel a minute ago! We're in trouble. Okay," he told the archaeologist, "we're making an emergency landing. Get back there and buckle into your seat!"

"I don't want to!" the archaeologist shouted. "The chains have been cut. He's awakened! Oh, I wish I'd never discovered those ruins. I positively refuse to go back there!"

"You idiot—in that case, hold on tight. Secure yourself to something. We're going in nose first!" the pilot shouted, and then he felt his whole body freeze.

There was no reply.

He turned around.

The archaeologist's back was just disappearing through the doorway.

"Where are you going?" he shouted after turning forward again.

"I'm going back."

"What?" the pilot said, his ears barely catching the words. "Huh? What's that? You're being called? Hey, pull yourself—"

He didn't have time enough for the final "together." His field of vision had been filled with white. The side of the mountain! The instant the pilot realized what he was seeing, his body was jolted by a terrific impact.

"—And that's why you're here. We had radio communication from the pilot who crashed into Mount Shilla four days ago—just once, at the time of the crash, and then we lost contact. He's probably dead by now."

A man with a spectacular beard that came down into two points opened a desk drawer and pulled out a white cloth sack.

"Here's thirty thousand dalas. Half is from us in the village of Mungs; the other half was fronted by them."

The Hunter's dark eyes shifted, capturing an old man in a suit and bow tie seated beside the man with the forked beard. The old man's expression quickly melted into one of rapture—he'd essentially been out of his mind since looking into those dark eyes. About a half hour earlier, he'd introduced himself to the young man in black before him as Federico Marquis, director of the Frontier Ruins Excavation Department

of the Noble Research Foundation, which was headquartered in the Capital.

"It's a sizable expenditure for an impoverished foundation like our own, but the item that aircraft was carrying is irreplaceable. We ask that you somehow bring it back in one piece."

"Let's hear what this item is," said the owner of those dark eyes—a young man in a long, black coat—speaking at last. Aside from giving his name at the beginning, it was the only thing he'd said.

"I must request that you refrain from asking that. It's of the utmost secrecy. I'm unable to divulge that information to anyone."

The figure in the black coat stood up. He intended to leave. Yet the way it looked like he was coming at them instead had to have something to do with his Noble blood. And in a strange way, both men unconsciously welcomed his approach.

"Please, wait," Marquis called out to him. "I beg of you. Can't you just do it without knowing?"

Though there was no wind, the hem of the Hunter's coat flared out.

"Oh, very well—I'll tell you!"

Still the young man in black continued to walk away.

The voice pursued him, saying, "The aircraft's cargo was—"

A different voice shot him down. "That'll do."

It was unclear what the young man in black made of the girl who stood in the doorway. The other two saw a girl in her teens dressed in a stunning poncho embroidered with silver and gold threads. She wore gold boots that came up a foot past her knees, and a knife was tucked neatly into one of them. Her gracefully curved longsword adorned her back, just as the black-clad man's did. The blue eyes set in what could be described as a beautiful and pure visage spoke volumes about the girl's true nature. So deep, so hard, so thoroughly nihilistic—she could only be a Hunter.

In a low but definitely female voice she spelled it out, saying, "Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Lilia. I'm a Hunter."

Her boots clacked loudly as she walked past the young man in black to stand in front of the desk.

"You're the mayor and the archaeologist, I take it. Well, you'd be better off hiring me instead of some guy who's going to sweat every little detail."

Displeased, the mayor said, "I don't know what sort of Hunter you are, but we've entrusted this matter entirely to that man right there. We were just about to enter formal negotiations. You'd better leave."

"Oh, that's too bad," she said, though her radiant expression didn't change in the least. In fact, her blue eyes were ablaze with defiance as she continued, "Tell me, Mr. Mayor—what's the difference between him and me? Sex? Looks? Name? Achievements? Reputation?"

"It's ability." The reply came not from the mayor, but from Marquis.

“Really?” An innocent smile spread across the face of the girl, Lilia.

The blood drained from the faces of both the mayor and the archaeologist. They didn’t know why.

“In that case, why don’t we do a little comparison? If it doesn’t work out, I’ll throw in the towel, no problem. How does that strike you?”

Her rosy lips allowed a faint gasp to escape. The figure in black was just going out the door.

“Hey, wait a second—you can’t go now. If I don’t beat you, they’ll never hire me. Wait!”

The mayor and the director saw the girl’s right hand reaching over her shoulder for the longsword. A blue streak split the glow of the gaslight in the mayor’s office. A cry of agony rang out.

II

The mayor and the director craned their necks, looking upward. A heartbeat after that cry, there was a terrific thud at the pair’s feet as an enormous ocher insect landed. The creature’s segmented body resembled a caterpillar’s, but of its six bristle-covered legs, the two nearest its head were shaped like human hands, and each of them clutched something resembling a nearly three-foot-long sword. A pair of weapons were now lodged in the abdomen of the six-and-a-half-foot creature. One of them, a rough wooden needle, came from D. If the other one, an eight-inch-long throwing dart, was one of Lilia’s weapons, she must’ve hurled it with the same speed as D. And judging from the way the weapons formed a V at the single point where their tips met—right in the creature’s heart, most likely—she was just as accurate as D, too.

The mayor and the scholar both let out a scream. Without a second to spare, the two Hunters raised their hands, and the bizarre bugs that fell one after another from the ceiling began twitching in their death throes.

The mayor was left speechless, but in his stead the gray-haired scholar said, “Those look just like the western Frontier’s—”

“That’s right. They’re gladiator bugs,” Lilia replied. “Recent weather anomalies and frequent geological shifts have caused changes in the home ranges of some creatures. This must be one of them. Usually they make their nests up in attics, so we’ll have to watch out.”

As she enthusiastically explained the situation, two more of the insects flew down right in front of her. These came down differently. They weren’t wounded. Standing erect on their lowest pair of legs, they pointed the swords they held in their hands at the two Hunters.

Gladiator bugs—as the name suggested, these insects used real swords. Needless to say, they weren't a product of the natural world. Nobles in the western Frontier had created them for their own amusement, monsters born in their laboratories to do battle with human slaves. After the fall of the Nobles' civilization, most of them were exterminated, but it was said the less than ten percent that escaped into the Frontier gave rise to the hundreds of thousands that now lived there. As specialists in combat, the Nobles had input formidable swordsmanship skill into the bugs' brains.

Slashing down from a high position, the blades locked together, and Lilia's expression became one of mild surprise. One of the swords made a horizontal slash at her abdomen. As Lilia leapt back, about four inches of her coat were torn open.

"Not too shabby," she said, her voice faltering.

The body of the insect that lunged at her from an angle to her right then pitched forward wildly. A heartbeat later her blade slipped into the crease beneath its head, removing that segment neatly from the insect's body.

Quickly shifting her eyes from the twitching bug to D behind her, Lilia pursed her lips in apparent dismay, saying, "What's this?"

D was just sheathing his blade. At his feet lay an insect that'd been quartered by horizontal and vertical slashes.

"Quicker than me? You're good, stud," Lilia said, jabbing D's shoulder with the longsword she held. "Sorry, but I need you to draw again. We need more than bugs to settle this once and for all."

"Perhaps this little business has changed his mind. Why don't we negotiate?"

D turned his back to them and headed for the door.

"Just a—" Lilia caught herself. Once D had left and the door had closed, she said to no one in particular, "Great. I picked a fight with him when I shouldn't have, and now I regret it. He cut that bug down without moving an inch from where he started."

"Um, excuse me!"

Hearing the voice of the woman chasing them, the hoarse voice from the vicinity of D's left hip remarked, "It's her. What are you gonna do?"

"Just let it be."

"But she sounds all fired up. I don't think she'll just let it be. Hell, she'd follow you into the men's room!"

Ultimately, Lilia caught up to the Hunter where he had his cyborg

horse tethered to a hitching post.

"I told you to wait, didn't I? Didn't you hear me—partner?"

"Partner?"

The reply caused Lilia's eyes to go wide with a look of uncertainty. She'd heard two voices. One from D, up in the saddle, and one from his left hand gripping the reins—a hoarse one.

"That's right. Right after you left, the mayor hired you and me both! Probably had something to do with the way we hacked apart those gladiator bugs, naturally."

"Unfortunately, I haven't hired on with anybody."

Cracking the reins against the cyborg horse's neck, D started forward on his steed.

As she looked back and forth between where she'd left her own horse and the young man riding away, Lilia said, "Let's do this. Let's work together. The mayor told me to get you to stay. That was his first job for me."

"You'll get a smaller cut," the hoarse voice said.

"That's not a problem. They agreed to thirty thousand dalas each, and not a dala more. But they said if it was just me, the chances of success would decrease, so it'd only be twenty thousand dalas. That's why I can't have you running off anywhere else!"

As Lilia walked alongside the cyborg horse, she seemed to have run out of things to say.

"What was the aircraft carrying, anyway?" the hoarse voice inquired.

"Huh? I haven't asked yet. I've had all I could do just catching up to you."

"It doesn't matter. I'm leaving," D said in a voice like exquisite ice. As he made a move to leave the grounds of the mayor's estate, he appeared emotionless, as if he'd already abandoned them.

"So, you mean to tell me the guy who bothered to ask what it was carrying doesn't care anymore? Something doesn't add up here. Stop playing me for a fool!"

Saying nothing, D left. The air seemed to be stirred with shattered ice as it took on a bluish tinge, trying to lend the same hue to the silvery chain of mountain peaks in the distance. The village was surrounded by a mountain range.

Once he'd gone through the gates, Lilia stopped.

"I haven't given up, you know. I'll chase you down through the very gates of Satanus's hell!"

On the way down the road back to the village, the hoarse voice said, "Peace and quiet at last, but she'll be coming again. Not that I have anything against that type. Why, before I wound up like this—well, it was quite a long time ago, but I seem to recall chasing one or two like her."

"A long time ago?" D said, looking up at the heavens. The moon was out. The moonlight seemed to lend a white glow to his face, but that was because D's beautiful face radiated a light of its own.

"Yep, a long time ago," the hoarse voice replied. "But then, what's a long time? How long have the two of us been alive? And what about you know who? Could you even call what we do or what he does living? What are life and death? I suppose only he can answer that. You know, D, I have to wonder if we aren't chasing after him to get him to tell us that."

"Are you tired?" D asked, turning his eyes to the silvery chain of peaks. "If so, I can take you off right here. You can go wherever you like."

"Hold it right there. Neither you nor I can do anything of the sort."

"We've never tried. How about it?"

"I'll pass. For the time being, anyway."

The blueness over the rustic route deepened as the gorgeous silhouette rode down it—and the pair's conversation died out.

Presently, the cyborg horse came to the busiest part of the village.

"As I recall, they're supposed to make a kind of salsa booze in this village. Let's go have a drink," the hoarse voice suggested.

"Resist the urge."

"No can do! Let me drink some of that salsa booze. I could down twenty or thirty gallons of the stuff. I'll take on all comers!" The hoarse voice became an angry shout that seemed likely to reach the edge of the village and beyond. "I'll pay ten thousand dalas to any man that can outdrink me. Lose, and you won't owe me any money. But the offer's only open to men with wives, or those with daughters over seventeen!"

D was just about to lash his steed with the reins when the doors to the saloon on his right opened and figures bundled in heavy overcoats streamed out, blocking the cyborg horse from going any farther.

"I'll take you up on that!"

"Me, too!"

"No, I'm first!"

It was as plain as the noses on their ruddy faces that all these farmers were already well into their cups. They ranged from those who looked to still be in their teens all the way up to a hunched-over bald man who had to be over a hundred.

"Okay, my friend, step into the saloon," one of them said. "We're glad to have you."

"Very well. I'm only too glad to accept your challenges," said the

hoarse voice.

"Kinda a husky voice you've got there—but you've got nerve, and I like that! The village graveyard has a corner where they bury everyone who drinks himself to death."

It was about twenty minutes later that Lilia, having collected her cyborg horse, galloped up to the saloon.

"What's going on here?"

A number of the villagers were stacked in a mound in front of the bat-wing doors. As Lilia furrowed her brow, another one tottered through the doors and took his place at the top of the pile before her very eyes.

"What is this?"

She was sure something was wrong. Swiftly dismounting, she went over to the man who'd just collapsed, and then she heard laughter from inside the saloon. It was hoarse.

"It's him!" she said.

Spinning on her toe, Lilia pushed her way through the swinging doors. Though she'd smelled it from outside the saloon, the fierce stink of alcohol now assailed her nose. That alone would've been enough to leave a child with alcohol poisoning. The saloon could hold perhaps thirty people total. But it looked as if twice that number were crowded in front of the tiny counter.

Nudging some of the farmers who lay strewn across the floor with the tip of her boot, she said, "What's with these guys?" Kicking one of them in the side to roll him over, Lilia grabbed four of the villagers who were crowded around the counter by the scruff of the neck, jerking them out of the way before pressing forward.

"Okay, pretty boy, now it's time for you to throw down with yours truly!" said a giant of a man seated on one of the center stools, his right hand lifting a whiskey glass.

The figure to his left said, "You country bumpkins and your big talk!" The caustic remark came from a hoarse-voiced D. "You think because you're one of the hardest-drinking fellas in the godforsaken sticks of the Frontier you can beat me? Dream on!"

His left hand indicated the men on the floor. The motion was jerky, as if somewhat forced.

The giant was easily angered. "Now you've gone and said it! Hey, Bob! This glass takes too damned long. Bring us some beer mugs!"

A cheer went up. The villagers must've been expecting big things

from their local hero.

The mugs were set up in front of them. They were filled to the brim with salsa booze—a kind of alcohol that was said to be ten times as potent as absinthe. Both raised their mugs. The rule was that they'd drain them simultaneously.

"Well, prost!"

The man's mug tilted, and its contents swiftly began to disappear. The giant's Adam's apple bobbed frantically. "Whew!" he roared, and he was just about to set his mug down when a din erupted, more gasps than cheers. D had already set his empty mug down.

"Pretty boy here—" The giant stopped, somewhat tongue-tied. "Hey, let's have another round, Bob!"

"Sorry, Baska, we're all out."

"Whaaaat?"

"Think about it: We've emptied five kegs in twenty minutes' time. But what worries me more than how I'm gonna open for business tomorrow is these guys lying all over the place."

"Okay," the giant said, clambering off the stool. Raising both hands and taking a boxing stance, he said, "We'll settle it with these, pretty boy. A man's gotta prove himself with his fists, not his cups."

III

"Sure," the hoarse voice replied magnanimously. And then it hiccupped.

"Are you drunk? Your face is paler than a damned moon gourd. The god of alcohol can't help you now. I'll send you to the ground with just one shot to the gut. Anyway, your voice don't match your face at all, mister."

"True enough."

"Oh, he speaks!"

The giant's eyes went wide, but he rolled up his sleeves. The pose he took looked like something he'd taught himself.

"What's with that goofy fighting stance? You really are a bumpkin, aren't you—ouuuuf!"

D's left hand squeezed into a fist, crushing out the insult, but that didn't stem the giant's anger. Hauling back with his right hand, he bellowed, "You son of a bitch!"

His fist arced out, plowing through the air.

"Huh?" he cried in astonishment after the punch that should've caught D right in the ear met only empty space. He was about to spin completely around, but he stopped himself halfway and returned to his stance. That was actually rather remarkable—his whole body was like a

spring. And then the man let out another cry of surprise. By the time he'd resumed his stance, D was standing right in front of him. Dark eyes of impossible depth reflected the giant's ruddy face. Their depth probably frightened the man.

Usually, the giant would get in a few shots in rapid succession while drawing his opponent in for a hook and then a body blow—but he forgot all about his winning combination and just took a swing. Still, the man couldn't find a hole in his opponent's defenses, which would've been easy if he'd been up against an ordinary human.

A hard slap reverberated. The man's fist had stopped in midair. D's left hand was wrapped around it.

Cries of surprise rang out in the room. They only whipped the giant into a frenzy. Letting out an unintelligible cry, he struck to the left. Before his blow could connect, the giant was sailing through the air. Easily flying over the heads of the oohing patrons, he landed at the other end of the room, right in front of a door that led to the back. The saloon quaked.

"Not bad at all," Lilia said, her eyes agleam. "Slammed him headfirst, eh? He won't be—" Her amused tone broke off there. "Apparently he will be okay after that."

Rubbing a neck as thick as a log, the giant used his other hand to lift his upper body from the floor. The way D had thrown him, it wouldn't have been surprising if his neck had been broken. He was like toughness in a pair of pants. Giving just one shake of his head, the giant used his hand to easily lift himself from the floor. And the bumpkin wasn't even shaking when he resumed his stance.

"Caught me off-guard. Shouldn't underestimate you just 'cause you're a pretty boy. Okay, time for the real deal." His drunkenness must've left him completely, because his face had a look of what some might term integrity as it twitched with murderous intent.

"Oh, he means business," Lilia said, a daring smile skimming across her lips. She was starting to enjoy this.

The floor creaked. The giant had gone into motion. His unbelievably light footwork put looks of amazement into the eyes of the villagers that testified they'd never seen it before. He'd never had a need to show anyone until now.

"Have at you!"

Leaving only his words behind him, the giant glided to the right.

Lilia's eyes bulged in their sockets. The deadly battle resumed. And this time, it was for real. It wouldn't stop until blood had been spilled.

Just then, from the door to the back room a voice called out, "That'll be all for now, Baska. We've got an urgent patient!"

It was a cultured female voice. Everyone turned to look, and the giant—Baska—grimaced with regret.

Standing in the doorway was a middle-aged woman in a long white

coat. The face framed by her graying hair was surprisingly youthful and brimming with rationality. A decade earlier, she wouldn't have been able to go anywhere without turning the head of every man.

"Mr. Shova's boy has a stomachache. The symptoms sound like appendicitis. Go get the wagon ready."

She sounded like a boss giving orders to an employee.

Baska turned and said, "Hey, Doc, hate to tell you this, but I ain't your freaking slave. No need to be talking to me like that in front of all these folks."

"And you can make all the bones you like about that after you've paid me back that five thousand dalas. Just how is it that a man whose gambling drove off his wife and kids, a man who had mobsters going after him for the money he borrowed, is living safe and sound now?"

That one icy blow showed just how sharp she was.

Quaking from head to toe, Baska fell silent. He was like an active volcano given human form. His anger bubbled like lava.

"Sooner or later, he's going to explode," Lilia said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Hurry up!" the woman he'd called "Doc" ordered, walking out into the room. The villagers in front of her cleared a path.

Clucking his tongue, the indignant Baska left.

Right in front of the doctor was the dwindling back of a figure in black. As D walked toward the bat-wing doors, the doctor called out to him, "Just a moment, please." Realizing he wasn't going to stop, she increased the length of her strides and went after him. "Won't you hear me out? I'm Vera. I'm the village doctor," she told him. "You have such good looks—could it be you're the man they call D?"

D pushed against the doors. A heavily wrinkled hand grabbed his shoulder.

"If you are, listen to what I have to say. I was hired by the Sacred Ancestor to do a certain job."

D turned around fluidly.

Vera was frozen—partly due to astonishment at his speed, but the rapture on her face said the real reason was something else. D was right there in front of her.

"What was it?" the dashing figure in black inquired. That alone seemed like it would suffice to make even the most tight-lipped person tell all. And no one would've blamed them. The young man was that gorgeous.

"What was . . ." Vera began, repeating him as if suffering from some sort of dementia.

At that point, they heard someone say, "Don't tell him."

A split second after D stepped to one side, the swinging doors opened. It was one of the men the Hunter had met with in the mayor's office—Director Marquis.

"What are you . . ." Vera began, the bewilderment showing in every inch of her as she gazed at the face of the tall, thin old man.

"You mustn't tell him. I came out here looking to somehow keep him from leaving, and now I've found my ace in the hole. D, if you want to hear what the doctor has to say, I need you to agree to go up the mountain."

Now it was Dr. Vera who was at her wits' end.

"No matter how handsome you may be, that won't work on Vera. It may be three years since I last saw her, but that doesn't change the fact she's my daughter," the old man said boastfully, but then a hint of anxiety suddenly crept into his expression. It spread across his entire face in the blink of an eye.

Taking his eyes off his daughter, the director looked at D. He then hurriedly tried to look away—but it was too late. In a heartbeat, both father and daughter were captives of his beauty.

"What was it?" D asked once more.

"It was . . ." Vera began.

Something whistled through the air. It looked as if it went in through one of D's temples, out the other, then ripped right through the bat-wing doors.

"Don't tell him!" Lilia cried, her left hand still poised from throwing the dart as her right hand reached for the sword on her back. "If he won't agree to go into the mountains, that leaves me in a bind. Because I was hired on condition of getting him to go along with me. So, that being the case, I'm in your corner."

"That's how it is, then," Director Marquis said, shaking his head. It was like waking from a dream. Or from a nightmare of unearthly beauty. "How about it, D? We don't have to stand around here jabbering. Would you care to discuss this in the private room in the back? Lilia and Vera, you two come along, too."

"Sorry, but I have an urgent patient to tend to," said Vera.

"It'll have to wait. This is the top priority. You can't be a widow playing country doctor for the rest of your life. I'll bring you back to the Capital with me."

"Another ace in the hole." The doctor shrugged her shoulders. Lowering her voice, she continued, "I'm sick and tired of living out in the sticks, tending to a bunch of filthy farmers. Take me with you. But not right now." Glancing at the bat-wing doors, she said, "Baska's back. See you later, Dad."

And with that she left, shaking her head from side to side.

The old archaeologist kept his eyes diverted from the Hunter as he asked, "Okay, D—what's it going to be?" Though he spoke rather triumphantly, he couldn't imagine what the future would hold.

Assorted Traveling Companions

chapter 2

I

You need to tell me what the cargo was," said D.

"That again? I'll say no more about it. You'll have to be content with my daughter's secret."

Something glittered and zipped in front of the director's eyes. He shut his arrogant mouth. All the old man's achievements as a scholar, his fairly good points as a person, and even his position in the Capital burned away like mist before that pale blade. Not that the man hadn't been through tough situations before. Excavations always involved problems with landowners and villagers, and the thugs they hired could be set off with a single boast, so he'd actually engaged in gunfights with pistol in hand. He also considered himself to have a good deal of nerve. But now all of that bravado came crashing down, just like the glory of the Nobility. The blade in the old man's field of view wasn't the same sort of weapon that he'd wielded in those battles. Even Lilia, his professed ally, couldn't so much as move a muscle.

"Answer me," D said.

Marquis didn't think he'd be able to reply. His fear was so great, it choked his throat. Yet from it issued the words: "A coffin." And they came the instant he heard D's voice.

"A coffin?" D asked, taking a step forward. Though he could no longer see the blade, the director moved too. The unlikely pair crossed the barroom and stepped out onto the planks of the wooden sidewalk. Walking down to the end of the building, they turned to the left. Just before the Hunter did so, he said, "Stay out of this."

That one icy remark made Lilia, who'd finally started after him, halt in her tracks. "Don't be such a spoilsport, D." There was something coquettish about her tone. "The fact is, I'm plenty curious about the cargo myself. You might've been called to this village, but I came here after hearing rumors about what that plane was carrying. See, this is the only route up the mountain."

"What sort of rumors?"

"Let me join up and I'll tell you."

"If they've hired you, we'll find out sooner or later, I reckon."

The sudden hoarseness of D's voice made Lilia's eyes widen. They shifted strangely to D's left hand.

"You—you can talk out of your left hand?"

"Heh heh heh, so the jig is up?"

"You make that voice on purpose? I think you need a third party's opinion on the matter. It's crude, and it sounds like some country bumpkin—just the worst!"

"My sentiments exactly," said D.

"Excuse me?" said the hoarse voice, but since both came from D, Lilia's eyes bugged again.

"The mayor and the director of whatever-it-was say you'll see what the cargo is as soon as you reach the aircraft," said the woman. "That's kind of obvious, isn't it? But I want to know *now*."

"You'd be betraying your employer," D told her.

"No problem. This clown's half-unconscious. He won't even remember I was here—"

Suddenly the girl tore open the right side of her combat vest.

"My goodness!" the hoarse voice remarked with admiration at the full breast that glistened in the moonlight.

"—but if he does remember anything, this'll throw him off track."

"Whose coffin is it?" D asked. He sounded as if he'd completely forgotten Lilia was there.

"Duke Gilzen's."

The director's reply drew a gasp. Lilia's eyes were drawn to D's left hand. From it, a groan of a voice had croaked Duke Gilzen's name. "This is too dangerous. What do you say to passing on this one? Did I hear you right, mister? What you say and what you do are completely at odds!"

This time there was no reply.

As if there'd been no place for Lilia here from the very start, D and Director Marquis continued talking.

"The coffin was unearthed from ancient ruins about two hundred miles north of this village. It was made of stone, and devoid of any Noble title, name, or any other description. That in itself was rare, but then all the defenses around the coffin completely defied common sense." As if even the memory itself were a curse, Marquis shuddered three times, but D's blade would brook no silence from him. The director continued. "There was no trace of any of the defenses Nobles set about their coffins. Not only that, but it even had a heavy chain wound five times around it. As if to guard against anyone getting out. That's all well and good—though no similar cases have been unearthed, if the chains were put there by humans, the reason for their actions is understandable. However, the following had been carved into the coffin's lid with some sort of blade: *The demon Duke Gilzen. Buried in the grave he truly deserves in the manner he has earned by Grand Duke Brubeck and his brave compatriots.* This Noble was sealed away by other Nobles. That, too, has precedent. Relations weren't necessarily cordial between all Nobles. However, the one ironclad rule among the Nobility was

broken by those who buried him. No matter how loathsome their sworn enemy might be, Nobles always interred fellow Nobility in a fitting grave. But the grave we found Duke Gilzen in was—"

"—a wretched little grave marked with a bare stone. What's more, it was buried ten thousand feet beneath one corner of a vast and sprawling ruin." At that point, the hoarse voice sounded just like D's.

"You knew about that?" the director said, staring at D in amazement.

A few seconds passed, and then the hoarse voice said, "A coarse stone grave that couldn't be described as Noble, set deep in the earth. Actually, just as was carved into the coffin in that dead language, it probably was the only fitting grave for the coffin's occupant, a Noble so abhorred by his fellow Nobility. Now I finally see. I know why that shudder passed through you, D. The devil Gilzen—the person in that coffin was feared by all the Nobility."

D pulled back his sword—or that's how it appeared to the director. Astonished, he blinked his eyes. There'd been no blade there at all. It had been returned to its sheath by the time they'd left the bar. The only reason he'd continued to perceive a sword pointed at his eye was because of the weird killing lust he sensed from D.

The aged director still hadn't completely roused from its effects when a voice like a cold, still winter's night filled his ear, saying, "I'll take the job," while another, hoarse one seemed to curse, "No, don't!" or words to that effect.

The aged director's brain was confused as to what to do until Lilia's voice returned him to reason, saying, "Then it's decided, Mr. Director."

"That it is. We're counting on you, D. Your job is to locate the coffin and bring it back down safely."

"And what if its occupant has awakened?"

"You must take him alive."

"You get no promise of that, where Duke Gilzen is concerned."

If he were to bring up the matter of his daughter Vera, he knew that would be effective—and yet, he couldn't do it. The old man nodded. "Understood. In that case, I shall leave it to your best judgment. Nevertheless, I want you to make the utmost effort to bring his body back down here."

"I can't do that, either."

"Why not?"

"The effect bringing Gilzen down here would have would be clear enough. But I can't allow that. The only Noble cursed by the Nobility must be destroyed in obscurity."

These must've been D's words. Could it be that D feared the man called Gilzen?

Before the aged director, the hem of the Hunter's coat flared out.

"There's some gear I need you to get. Come with me."

The three of them walked off. Straight ahead lay their destination,

which wasn't the most fitting place in the world for the Hunter—a general store.

Leaving the director to settle the bill, D went to the hotel and got a room. Lilia left, indignant, going off in pursuit of the director. Now that D had taken the job, she'd been told that her services were no longer needed. By this point, she was undoubtedly embroiled in relentless, passionate negotiations in some room in the town hall.

"A snow-covered mountain? That's the worst environment for you! And up against Duke Gilzen, of all people. Let's pass on this one."

His left hand had practically been foaming at the mouth ever since he'd stepped into the room, but D replied, "I can't do that." His tone was tranquil as always, yet carried a strength. It could probably be called determination. "This job is in my blood. I can't run or hide from it."

"The one who put it there took it upon himself to do so. You don't have to take responsibility for this."

"If I don't, who will?"

The left hand fell silent.

"The offer came just as I was about to head into the northern Frontier. They wanted someone to rescue the crew and cargo of an aircraft that'd crashed in the snowy mountains. If there were no survivors, they asked that I bring back the cargo alone. True, dhampirs are impervious to the cold. But even given that, it wasn't the sort of job I should take."

"You mean to say the devil made you do it?"

"The cargo was Gilzen's coffin—it's safe to say his will might've put us in motion."

"You seem pretty calm about that. And there's nothing you hate more than being made to act on someone else's wishes."

"If Gilzen rises again, what will become of the world?"

D opened his left hand. Ripples spread across the surface of his palm, and a human face appeared. Covered with wrinkles that could be those of the very young or the very old, nevertheless it had eyes swimming with vitality as it gave him a wry grin. "Ruin," it said.

"*He* knew that full well. Both at the time, and in the future. And that's why he entrusted me with this."

" A 'murder outside time'? Sounds like the name of a cheesy movie."

Just as the left hand was grimacing, there was a knock at the door.

"That female Hunter back so soon?"

Turning toward the door, D asked, "Who is it?" Though his voice was

low, the person outside could hear it clearly.

"Crey's the name. I'm a traveling man. I'm here with a request for you."

"It's open."

Just as D responded, a lanky fellow slipped in like a breeze. Though his traveler's coat and thermal trousers were threadbare in spots, his face was intrepid. It would be safe to say his expression was that of a daring man. The faint scar on his left cheek only served to heighten the intensity of the eyes that reflected D.

"You'd be Mr. D, I take it? I'm Crey—"

"Crey Jansen—a.k.a. Crey of the Deadman's Blade."

For a second, the intrepid expression turned to one of shock that peered at the source of that hoarse voice.

II

"To be honest, this is kind of a surprise," the man who'd introduced himself as Crey said frankly. "I'd heard that anyone who got as far as D's room either walked off disappointed without even reaching for the doorknob, or else got carried out—as a stiff."

"That's because those clowns didn't even knock. They just barged in with a sword or a pistol or whatever in one hand," said the hoarse voice.

"Then you mean to tell me my good manners saved my life?" Crey donned an intimidating smile.

D finally spoke. "Say your piece."

Crey stared at D, stunned once more. Blinking his eyes stupidly, he eventually came to grips with matters and composed himself, saying, "I've heard all sorts of rumors about you, but I didn't know you did ventriloquism."

"Well then, it seems like a certain outlaws' grapevine isn't all it's cracked up to—ouuuf!"

Giving a light shake of the fist he'd just closed, D gestured to a chair. He didn't say to have a seat, nor did Crey move.

Moistening his lips with his tongue, he finally got down to business, saying, "I want you to take me up Mount Shilla with you."

"I can't." D's reply was terse. It left the man no footing at all.

"That's right," the hoarse voice interjected in a tone that sounded pained. "We're the bona fide rescue party, working at the village's request. If you want in, go get the village's permission."

"That's out of the question." Crey shrugged his shoulders.

"I thought as much. What with you being wanted for murder and all. A government official from the Capital, and an innocent family of three

—Crey of the Deadman's Blade has sunk pretty low, I guess."

Disregarding the jibes of the hoarse voice, Crey wore an intent expression as he asked D, "You got a spokesman working for you now?" Apparently he'd noticed the inhabitant of the Hunter's left hand. "And a pretty unsavory one at that. Want me to get rid of him?"

Crey's right hand turned with a flick of his wrist, and like a magic trick, a thin double-edged knife lay in its grip. The only explanation seemed to be that it'd appeared from thin air. Was this the famed Deadman's Blade?

"Don't worry. You won't feel a thing, and there won't even be any blood. Once the little nasty living in it has died off, I could put your hand back where it belongs and it'll move just the same as before. But only if it's within three days of it being cut off."

D looked at his left hand. "Is that so?" he said.

"Don't do it!" the hoarse voice shouted.

"Well, if the boss says it's okay—" The knife spun in Crey's hand.

With a shout, the left hand circled around behind the Hunter's back. Whether D moved it or the hand moved itself was unclear.

"I wouldn't kill a fleeing man." Crey grinned wryly, making to put his blade away. He'd only been joking.

"I'd see your skill," D said.

Crey's eyes glimmered. At that moment, the two men were no longer ordinary people.

"Are you sure? That's not the sort of thing to joke about."

"Let's see the Deadman's Blade." Devoid of expression, D's face was so beautiful, and so chilling.

"This comes as a surprise. I'd heard you never let on about giving a rat's ass about anyone else." Crey's expression was intrepid, and dangerous. "Though it seems you make exceptions when it comes to exceptional abilities. Happy to oblige, D!"

This is what it was to be a fighting man. The Hunter didn't say he'd bring the man along if he displayed his skill, and the outlaw didn't even change his stance before launching his lanky form at D. The gleaming arc of his weapon, however, slashed the air an inch or more from the base of D's neck. He'd blown it. No, not exactly. The edge of that gleaming arc clung to the tip of the knife like a thread. At that moment, Crey's expression became as blank as D's. An unvoiced battle cry—the tip of the knife trembled, and the thread of light that hung in the air without vanishing sped at D's shoulder as if hurled at it. Blood spurted out.

"I think that's far enough." That declaration came from the attacker —Crey. There was no triumphant ring to the words. He was holding his own right shoulder. And from between his fingers dripped blood.

The weapon responsible was clutched in D's left hand: a knife with a footlong blade—or rather, a dagger. However, considering that the two

men were separated by almost fifteen feet, it would be impossible to attack with that. There wasn't even any gore on its blade.

The victim alone understood. "So, you saw through my trick, did you? But I didn't even see it coming. That's the man called D, eh?"

"What you did just now isn't all of it," D said while returning the dagger to the back of his belt. "But I saw the Deadman's Blade—as promised."

"I get you. I had thought about putting a little scare into you, but you're more than I can handle. But I don't give up, D." His knife spun. It vanished, then reappeared.

Crey's face turned toward the door, an intrigued smile rising on it. "Got a visitor."

As he said that, there was a knock at the door.

"A kid," said the hoarse voice. The knock had sounded tiny and diffident.

D looked at Crey.

"Yeah, I know. Be seeing ya." The knife master walked over to the door, grabbed the knob, and opened it. "C'mon in."

On the other side of the doorway stood a boy who looked to be seven or eight. In stark contrast to his thermal coat, worn through in numerous spots, the boy looked cultured.

"C'mon in."

As Crey repeated his invitation, the boy stepped in without hesitation.

"Thanks for coming. I'm D."

As the boy looked up at Crey, his face showed expectation and anxiety—and was then suffused with joy.

"Just kidding—that's him over there. He's my brother from another mother. You know what that means?"

"Yes, I know what it means," the boy replied with a nod. "You're best friends, right?" He had the voice and countenance of a clever child.

"That's right," Crey said with a grave nod, then a shiver passed through him and he coughed once. "Mr. D can be a hard one to deal with. He ain't the kind to hear requests too readily. Let me act as your go-between. You wanna climb Mount Shilla, don't you?"

"Yes," the boy replied with a nod, his gaze alternating between Crey and D.

"Care to tell us the situation?"

"Yes."

The boy was going to nod a third time, but he was cut short by the egregious supernatural aura. It was the same air that'd just caused Crey to shudder and cough.

"This man has nothing to do with me. Also, no one can accompany me. If you wish to climb the mountain, do so on your own."

"I can't do it all alone!" said the boy, effortlessly breaking through

the shackles of D's unearthly aura. His weapon was single-mindedness. "My father went missing while climbing Mount Shilla last winter. During the winter they couldn't send up a search party, and when they did launch one in the spring, half of them disappeared just like my father, and they never did find him. Ever since, no one's gone up the mountain. Today, an uncle of mine who works in the town hall was good enough to tell me about you. I won't be in the way at all. I'll do whatever you say. I'll even search for my father by myself. Just bring me with you for the climb—"

"Were you born around here?" D asked. Though he spoke in a tone like ice, there was no unearthly aura to him now.

"Uh-huh. Oh, I'm Lourié, by the way."

"D."

"I'm Crey."

When D gave him a hard look, the outlaw turned away despondently. "Okay, okay. See ya around, D." Raising a hand in farewell, he left the room.

"I, er—"

The boy was about to speak when D stopped him, waiting the span of a breath before walking over to the door. Although he walked normally, his footfalls made no sound. Grabbing hold of the knob, he pulled.

There stood Crey, with one ear pressed to the door. As D gazed at him without a word, he smiled sheepishly and said, "See ya." This time he did indeed walk away. Even after watching him descending the stairs, D didn't take his eyes off the man for a while.

Finally shutting the door, he turned to Lourié and asked, "As a local, you know about White Devil Mountain, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you know how frightening the mountain can be. This isn't like climbing an ordinary mountain in winter."

The boy's tiny frame suddenly seemed to shrink to half its size.

D continued, "All I know are the rumors. But on its peak stood the castle of one of the three most atrocious Nobles in all their accursed history. Though the Nobility may be destroyed and their castle fallen to ruin, they say their ghosts still roam the mountains, draining the blood of any who would dare the slopes."

The boy was speechless.

"Nor are they the only thing that threatens climbers. There are tales of beasts and demons of the Nobility's crafting, various strange phenomena, and mountain folk who live up there and feed on the monsters. You talk about searching for your father, but I don't think a child could accomplish that on his own."

His tiny face turned toward the floor.

"Did you think that if I climbed with you, I'd help you as well? Don't

underestimate the mountain."

His callous words were like an ice pick through the boy's heart. The boy gazed down at his feet for a long time. Then, looking up, he quietly made his apologies. Just before he turned his back to the Hunter, he said, "I'll see myself out."

The door was opened and closed again behind him, at which point the hoarse voice commented with admiration, "That's one focused little brat. I thought he was gonna squirt a few tears for us, but he left here with a composed face. I hope that's the end of it, though." The voice seemed to be gauging D's reaction.

"There's only one choice he can make," D replied. That interest was rare for him. You might even call it miraculous.

"To give up? I knew a gorgeous little brat once who'd never give up. Made me sick and impressed the hell out of me at the same time. Kinda reminds me a lot of that kid—"

"Tomorrow morning, we set off," D said, cutting the hoarse voice short.

The mountain could be seen through the window. It looked for all the world like an ordinary, snow-covered peak.

III

His departure early the next morning was forestalled by a knock at the door.

"What the hell do you want?" a hoarse voice of peerless unsociability called through the door, causing the person on the other side to fall silent. Finally, he said, "It's the bellhop. Actually, we've got a number of dangerous-looking visitors downstairs—and they want to know your room number, sir."

"Oh, thanks for the heads-up. Guess you earned that tip. Okay. Better go down and see 'em."

"Beg pardon?"

"How many are there?"

"Ten."

"That'll be a nice little warm-up before breakfast, then."

"Excuse me?"

"How do they look?"

"Like drifters, warriors, or bounty hunters—villains, plain and simple."

"Pretty much what I figured. I'll be headed right down. Tell 'em to wash behind their ears and be waiting in their Sunday best."

"As you wish."

Once the informant had left, the hoarse voice asked, “Who are they?”

“As the man just told you, people who heard rumors of me being here,” said D. His tone was just the same during the day as it was at night. When exactly did the young man sleep?

“Hoping to join you on the trip—or I suppose not, eh? Probably hoping to take your place.”

The voice gave a gloomy yet amused chuckle. But it broke off and muttered, “What’s all this?” It seemed to be listening rather intently. “A brawl’s breaking out down there! They’re turning on each other, jockeying for position, I suppose. Let’s go watch!”

There was no reply. D remained lying on the bed.

His left hand jittered. “Oh, man, we’re talking about complete strangers mixing it up! What could be more fun to watch than that? I wanna see it. I wanna hear ’em. The wilder it gets, the more fun it is. If someone gets killed, that’d be the best! C’mon! Let’s hurry up and get down there.”

D opened his eyes.

“Finally!”

“He said there were ten of them, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. No, wait a sec. Now that you mention it . . . We’ve got some late arrivals . . . Two of ’em. Probably more bounty hunters.”

Here the hoarse voice fell silent for a while, perhaps listening through the thick wooden door and floor for sounds from below.

“Oh, someone’s getting thanked. And the one doing the thanking . . . seems to be the hotel’s owner or something. And someone else says they’re welcome . . . A woman. That lady doctor from last night. Well, let’s go see ’em.”

Still, D didn’t move. This young man was absolutely indifferent toward other people.

Then the Hunter sat up.

“What is it?”

“The weather’s cleared. Time to climb.” His heavenly visage was peering out the window at Mount Shilla.

It was ten minutes later that D descended the grand staircase down to the lobby with a big backpack over one shoulder.

On the Frontier, they always cleaned up quickly after trouble, because it tended to hamper business. There was no sign of even a single wounded or dead person, and an old man who was apparently the janitor was busily mopping the blood from the floor. Judging from the fact that the great carpet had been pulled up, quite a lot of blood

must've been spilled.

The man and woman seated on the sofa to one side of the lobby got to their feet and looked up at D on the stairs. It was the village doctor—Vera—and a bald giant of a man who stood nearly six feet eight. It wasn't Baska. At the man's feet was a pack that looked to be easily three times the size of D's, and bearskin cold-weather gear. Other winter clothes were resting on the sofa. Vera wore black cold-weather gear, while the giant had on a wool shirt and thermal trousers. The shirt was made of the stitched-together hides of snow mice. In these parts, they were said to be the best protection you could have against the cold.

"Good morning," said Vera.

D merely nodded slightly. Not that he was arrogant. Nor unsociable. That's just the sort of young man he was.

Smiling, Vera continued, "Allow me to introduce you: this is Dust, a guard here in the village. He's agreed to serve as my bodyguard, at the mayor's behest. We're to accompany you."

Down in the vicinity of D's hip, his left hand groaned.

"Why?" D inquired.

"Would you come down here? I don't care to have you looking down at me from the stairs."

Saying nothing, D came down the stairs. His next question wasn't a reiteration of the last. "What happened to the ten people who were here?"

"Dust was kind enough to take care of them."

One look at the man would be enough to convince anyone that he was probably up to such a task. It looked as though, if his massive form were hollowed out, D in his entirety would easily fit inside. Even through his heavy shirt, the bulging lines of his biceps and pectoral muscles were evident. Judging from the splashes of blood he wore in a variety of places, there must've been some fierce fighting, but he was sufficiently composed.

Not responding at all, D headed for the exit. Their request to accompany him up the mountain seemed lost in the depths of forgetfulness.

"It's not known how many people were onboard the aircraft, but if there are any wounded—well, you know where this is going. Orders from the mayor. Here it is in writing."

Dashing his eyes across the stark sheet of paper she produced from her cold-weather gear, D told her, "Good enough." His tone carried not the tiniest fragment of interest. Nor did he ask her anything about the business with the Sacred Ancestor. "But I'll be too busy to look after you. He alone will have to serve as your babysitter. One more thing—you'll have to follow my instructions."

"Understood." The doctor nodded, turning her gaze to the giant.

His enormous bald pate slowly dropped and rose again.

“Quite a pair they make. They’ve got their act down pat,” a voice fairly whispered, but apparently it reached the ears of Vera and the giant, who furrowed their respective brows but ultimately didn’t understand where it’d come from. The hoarse voice asked, “What happened to that fella who ran amuck in the bar last night?”

“He’s in the hospital. It seems when you threw him, he broke his neck.”

There was an appreciative whistle. When the man had gotten up again so easily, he must’ve been hiding the pain he was in. He was possessed of a good deal of nerve.

“We’re off, then,” D said without turning, pushing his way through the doors.

“Just a minute!” the doctor cried after him in an agitated manner.

The beginning of the route up the mountain was to the west of the village. The entrance to the trail up the slope was blocked by thick concrete slabs and barbed wire. Next to the door waited a middle-aged man.

“Mr. D, isn’t it?” he called out, his words seeming to float into the air. That was on account of D’s good looks.

“That’s right.”

“The mayor told me to wait here. I’ll open ’er up for you straightaway.”

To the right side of the door was a little steel hatch for making inspections. Pushing his key into the heavy lock and opening it, the man stepped to one side.

“How long have you been here?” D inquired.

As if in a dream, the man replied, “Since daybreak.”

“Anyone come by besides me?”

“Not a one. Why would they?”

“Any other routes up the mountain?”

Shrugging his broad shoulders, the man said, “If you were of a mind to, you could climb it from anywhere. Only you’d be stranded before you’d climbed fifty yards, I kid you not. Every place but here the rock goes straight up more than a hundred yards. What’s more, you’ve got an overhang at the top. Oh, what have we here?” On seeing the lady doctor and the giant of a man racing closer, the middle-aged man furrowed his brow. “Those two climbing too? Well, good luck with that!”

When he turned to face D again, the young man in black was already through the doorway. As he listened to the snow crunching under the hasty footfalls of the approaching pair, the man looked up at the sky

above.

The light had dimmed. Clouds had formed. And on seeing the white flecks dancing on the slope before him, the man shuddered.

"So, the second that young fella went through, maybe the only clear day we'll see all winter goes to pot? And now we've got snow, to boot. This is gonna be a snowstorm. A hell of a time to be climbing Mount Shilla. Who in blazes is this guy?"

"Looks like they're following us," the hoarse voice remarked when the Hunter came to a sign marking two thousand yards above sea level.

It'd taken D less than an hour to climb that far. Mount Shilla reached 3,657 yards above sea level. It was a little less than twenty-five hundred yards from the village of Mungs to the top of the mountain.

"Another fifteen hundred yards—compared to the Great Mountains of Madness in the southern Frontier, that's child's play . . . but they don't have any Noble castles on 'em, I suppose. From here on out, there's a route, but no path. The monsters out in the snow are probably limbering up their tentacles. If we reach the aircraft and there are wounded up there, we won't be able to bring 'em down. We don't even know if Duke Gilzen is still shut in his coffin or not."

Through this gloomy commentary, D silently gazed at the mountain peak. His whole body had already been plastered in white. While it wasn't exactly a blizzard, in another five minutes the wind-whipped snow would probably earn that name.

Setting down the pack that'd been over his shoulder, D opened it and pulled out a red paper bag. It was a heat pack intended for mountain climbing in winter. Sticking it inside his coat, D looked off to the right—and up at the snowy path that continued all the way to a rocky ridge. The path was lined on both sides with white rocks. Atop one of those to the right was a creature whose white hide was flecked with black spots, clearly poised to pounce. Had D caught its faint snarl? Or had he merely sensed its presence?

A stark flash of light shot from D's right hand, searing through the cold air. Piercing the snow panther's hide, it struck a rock a few yards distant.

"Oh, so it vanished, did it? Look for the black spots."

Still in the act of reaching for the hilt of his longsword, D became a statue. His eyes squinted to a thread-thin line. At the focus of his gaze—an area of white snow about ten yards ahead—black dots came into view, and D moved forward with slow, almost gliding actions. The instant it was at his feet, D's right hand flashed into action.

The unique snarl of a carnivore rang out, and bright blood scattered on the snow to D's rear. Returning a sword devoid of even a drop of blood to its sheath, D turned around for a look.

The foe he'd slain with a single blow, guided not by sight but by instinct, was slowly taking shape on the white snow. Its form, semitransparent like a jellyfish, had been cleft in two in a manner that could only be described as exquisite, but the beast didn't have a single black spot on it. The black dots still lay scattered in front of D, undisturbed. They were to draw the attention of the creature's prey, allowing it an opportunity to strike them from behind. This was something only a creature able to blend in with the snow could do, but the trick hadn't trumped D's superhuman senses.

"By the way," said the hoarse voice, "that snow panther wasn't after us initially. Which means—"

The beast's target had been off to D's right. Where the strange rocks were lined up.

Silently, D began climbing the snowy trail.

"Hey, are you just gonna ignore 'em? From the sound of the breathing, it's a human!"

D must've noticed that from the moment he first encountered the snow panther. But the young man was ready to ignore the person and move on.

Chortling, the hoarse voice said, "I'd be lying if I said that wasn't just like you. Just make sure you won't regret this later, you hear?"

"The doctor's coming up behind us."

D extended his right hand. The wooden needles he'd hurled at the snow panther had struck the strange rock beside him. Four needles were clustered within a half inch of each other. Grabbing the lot and pulling them out, D took one of the needles and threw it again. It was aimed at the same rock the snow panther had been facing.

There was a strident sound, and the needle split in two. That was followed by the clink of a sword returning to its sheath, and then a figure stepped out from behind the rock carrying something wrapped in a battered thermal cape.

"Is that how you always say hello?"

Taking her hand away from the sword on her back and using it to support the worn cape as she smiled at the young man was none other than the Huntress Lilia.

The watchman for this route up the mountain had said no one had been there since daybreak. Lilia had undoubtedly gone over the gate before that.

Before she could get another word out, D said, "The village doctor will be along shortly. Have her look at that kid."

The fighting female made a surprised face. "You knew it was a child? He's got some scratches, so was it the smell of his blood that tipped you

off, I wonder? After all, you're a dham—"

Lilia held her tongue. D had already turned his back to her. Flustered, she called after him, "You know, it's great that you're really focused on your job and all, but do you just intend to run off and leave the kid to the women? Huh?"

Lilia put her right ear against the bundle in the cape.

"And on top of everything, he seems to know you," she said. "He keeps calling out, 'Mr. D! Mr. D!' "

D didn't halt. He'd already covered more than thirty yards.

"Give it up, sonny. I didn't think he was as cold as all that. Though for a pro, that's perfectly natural, I suppose." Crinkling her brow, Lilia set the figure wrapped in the thermal cape down on the ground. "He threw that needle of his to mark your location, but I cut it down. If I leave you out here, they'll be able to see you. Look! See those two down there? They'll be here in another seven or eight minutes. If anything weird jumps you in the meantime, you'll just have to chalk it up to piss-poor luck. I'm a pro, too."

And then, making a looping cruciform gesture that those in the western Frontier believed warded against bad luck, she headed after D without a backward glance.

The wind and snow had begun to intensify.

New Life

chapter 3

I

At midday the snowstorm started in earnest. As the wildly dancing snow of the blizzard denied even D his sight, the hoarse voice groaned, “This ain’t good. I bet you can’t see three feet in front of us!” Its languid tones were torn away by the wind. “I’m getting sleepy, too. There’ll be trouble if we don’t find us someplace to sleep.”

“I slapped on a heat pack.”

“That little thing doesn’t count for squat. It’s the temperature outside that’ll decide if we live or die.”

It was most likely already five degrees below zero or worse. D’s form was dissolving into the blizzard, and the snow was now up to his knees. If a normal human didn’t find shelter under these conditions, they’d freeze to death inside of five minutes. Even for one descended from the ageless and undying Nobility, walking was becoming physically impossible, with his speed now less than ten yards an hour. While pressing on wouldn’t be impossible, it would be pointless.

D surveyed his surroundings. Turning toward the mountainside, he put out his left hand. Immediately a sleepy voice responded, “Walk along the side of the mountain about fifty yards. There’s a cave.”

He reached it soon enough. The cavern was elliptical, looking to be twenty feet high at its highest point and over six and a half at the lowest, though it was half-filled with snow. It was rather deep, and the snow no longer gusted in when he’d ventured five yards from the entrance. Before long the wind would probably change direction. At any rate, this was the best D could do until the blizzard had blown itself out.

D continued toward the rear. The cavern was quite deep. Though there was no trace of any creatures lurking there, it would be too dangerous not to check anyway. Once he’d been attacked, it would be too late.

About ten yards in, his progress was checked by a rock wall. He pressed the palm of his left hand against it, and the hoarse voice quickly responded, “It’s okay. It’s the real deal.”

The Hunter turned and was about to go back the way he’d come, but halted. A shadow stretched out before him. Only half as dark as an ordinary shadow, it was that of a dhampir born of both human and Noble lineage. And strangely, there was no light there to cast any

shadows. D had already slipped into combat mode. His right hand came up naturally, no doubt ready to shoot for the hilt of his longsword in the shortest possible time. Yet two seconds passed without any tension or killing lust. D turned around.

Where the rock wall had been the cave now continued on, and five or six yards ahead of the Hunter flames blazed. A campfire. Sap bubbled to the surface of the roughly broken tree branches. There was no one there. The area behind it was blocked by the cavern walls.

"Seems we've fallen into a psychological attack."

It was unclear what, if anything, D made of the hoarse voice's words, for he was emotionless as he approached the little fire. He hadn't needed the hoarse voice to tell him someone had launched a psychological attack. The question was—how had he fallen for it? Whatever lurked in that cave on the snowy mountain, it had gotten the better of D's instincts and his superhuman senses. Was this why the place was called White Devil Mountain?

He held his left hand out over the flames. They were hot. Slowly he lowered it again. Though the hoarse voice didn't cry out, the Hunter felt the heat all the way to his bones. It seemed to be a real fire. However, his left hand didn't react to it.

D put out his left hand again—and at that instant the scene all around him distorted. The howl of an enormous beast shredded the snow and wind, and a gigantic white form filled the cave. The snow that whisked into the air from the thud of the fallen body mixed with fresh vermilion, and it fell like rain on a huge, twitching white carcass.

D gave a light shake of his head. He was throwing off the scant vestiges of the illusion beast's glamour. Its titanic maw was still open, with more than ten feet separating its upper jaw from the lower one. Each of those bore a pair of huge, yard-long molars. The form on the whole resembled the mouth of a hippopotamus. Yet the head and body combined only reached a length of six and a half feet. D saw several dead branches at the back of its lower jaw. It must have used those branches to convince humans who entered the cave that they were seeing a fire. And that was how it invited them right into its mouth. Because it showed humans in the snowy mountains the first thing they desired, the beast probably also possessed a slight ability to read minds.

Snow and wind broadsided the Hunter. The whole cave had been an illusion.

"That was a close one, eh?"

On the snowfield off to the right, a figure swaddled in a winter coat had just gotten up. He identified himself, saying, "It's Crey. Remember me?" When he showed the Hunter the knife in his right hand, it was wet with fresh blood. Apparently even his thick gloves didn't impede its use. He pulled off his goggles and tugged down his muffler, and sure enough, there was the face of the outlaw.

“Did you collapse on the way up here?” D asked. The man’s sudden rise from the snow must have garnered his interest.

“That’s a hell of a way of putting it. I came this far on my own ’cause you told me I was outta luck. Not bad, eh? My coat’s got a thermostat, and you can even toss on the hood and use it as a sleeping bag. Hell, you could sleep out in cold like this for twenty-four hours straight, no problem. It’s the latest thing, ordered special from the eastern Frontier. Speaking of which, you’re not wearing a winter coat, are you?”

Pounding the chest of his own bulky coat, he continued, “It’s bad enough that illusion beast pulled you in, but I’m surprised you can even walk in a snowstorm like this without a winter coat, goggles, a muffler, or anything. You guys with Noble blood are a breed apart!”

“Are you the one that killed it?”

They were alone on the snow-whipped expanse. Nevertheless, a grin rose to Crey’s lips at that odd question.

“Damn straight. Only it wasn’t just me. It was them, too.” The outlaw gave a toss of his chin to the snowy trail to D’s rear.

Before D could turn and look, three figures came into view—in a perfect line of small, medium, and large sizes. To be precise, there were actually four of them. A tiny figure bundled in a winter coat was strapped to the back of the giant, Dust.

“That was a close call, D.”

Her mask was pulled down, but Dr. Vera still clutched a rifle. Judging by the size of the sighting mechanism, it was undoubtedly equipped with a digital-imaging virtual scope. Just point it in the right direction and it would deliver an image clear of fog or gusting snow—making a precise sniper shot possible even when those factors reduced visibility to less than three feet. It was unclear whether or not D had noticed the bullet hole that had appeared in the head of the illusion beast.

“You owe us, D,” the tall, lithe figure beside the doctor—Lilia—said patronizingly.

“It’s okay. Think nothing of it.” Vera smiled at him. “I’m a doctor, but I was forced to take a life.”

“Don’t sweat it, Doc. Our selfish friend Mr. Sexy Pants here brought it on himself. He tried to be cool and go up alone, but he just ended up walking right into an illusion beast’s mouth and needing his bacon saved. Sure you haven’t forgotten the basics, D?” Lilia said, staring daggers at him through her goggles.

The sound of a running shower could be heard, mixed with a whistled melody.

"That's 'The Nobles' Moon.' A very popular tune in the Capital more than a decade ago."

As she shared that tidbit with D, who was leaning back against one wall, the doctor trained a look of boundless compassion on the face of the tiny figure lying in bed. Lourié's face was red and puffy, and his breath as hot as fire.

"I'm amazed one so small climbed as far as he did in this snow. He set out before dawn. Must really have had a good reason, wouldn't you say?"

Apparently Lourié hadn't told the doctor about his father yet. No doubt his poor equipment and his exhaustion had brought on his high fever.

"By the look of him, he's coming down with pneumonia. I have some medicine with me, but it's not likely to work on something this serious. Now it's just up to his own strength."

"This is one of the Nobility's portable refuges," D said in a flat tone. Vera's cheeks flushed. The young man's voice was that gorgeous. "It should be stocked with medical supplies."

From off in the distance, Lilia called out in reply, "I bought this refuge from a traveling merchant. The medicine and weapons were sold separately. Too rich for my blood."

Vera dropped her gaze. She had an uncommon number of wrinkles for her age, and her expression suggested she was about to earn more.

Merchants who specialized in buying and selling the Nobility's things —everything from everyday goods to weapons and magical apparatus— met several different kinds of welcome out on the Frontier. In impoverished villages, the merchants might be killed or at least robbed of their wares, while in wealthy villages they would be paid whatever price they asked. The merchants were also in the habit of changing their goods in an effort to maximize profits. Take this refuge, for example: some merchants might throw in the weapons and medical supplies at no extra cost.

"In any case," the doctor continued, "why did he come up here all alone? If nobody tried to stop him, there's not much we can do about that, but if someone goaded him into it, I'll curse them for as long as I live."

"Will he make it?" D inquired.

"As I just said, it all comes down to the boy's constitution. If we had just one of the Nobility's nutrient supplements, he'd be all set in five minutes' time, but all we can do here is sit back and watch."

Vera's gaze skewered D.

"Say, you have Noble blood in you, don't you? Isn't there anything you can do? Are you carrying any fortifying drugs or anything?"

“It’s no use, Doc,” Lilia spat coldly from the depths of the seven-hundred-square-foot refuge. “It’s great that you work as a doctor out in a Frontier village and all, but how could you be so misinformed when it comes to the Nobility, I wonder? That’s the problem with book smarts. You see, the Nobles’ blood is blue. And it’s cold enough to freeze anything it touches.”

“My, but aren’t you well informed,” Vera said, turning to find the tall woman in a combat bodysuit, white steam still rising from her.

As a warrior’s first layer of protection, the bodysuit was what kept their skin from harm, with most composed of fire-dragon scales or the hides of iron men. Judging from the luster of the one the girl wore, it was one of the more affordable lightweight metal-alloy types referred to as “smith made.” Still, it would deflect rounds from a high-caliber rifle as long as two didn’t strike the same spot, and no amount of biting from the fangs of rock serpents, lesser demons, or the like would harm it. Put second and third layers of combat gear over that, and it was said even an infant could serve as a warrior.

However, what protected this young woman’s body was of considerably less interest than the heavenly gifts beneath it. Full breasts bulged from the chest protector, and as if to emphasize the richness of her other assets, she had an hourglass waist and beautiful legs exposed by the merciless slit of the suit’s skirt. Every inch of her flesh was pink and steaming, and to make matters worse, she gave off an indescribable perfume. If some masculine foe were to suddenly attack now, he’d most likely lose the will to fight and succumb to her counterattack.

As her alluring scent spread mercilessly in all directions, Lilia’s eyes flashed with malice. You might even call it a glint of madness.

“My parents and two brothers were all drained of blood by the Nobility, then had their heads cut off. They had no problem feeding on them, but didn’t want them joining their ranks, I guess. My big brother was nine, and my little one, six. That’s what Noble blood really means. That’s what flows through him. No point asking him to do anything for humans. Don’t forget, this is the same man who left behind a moaning, feverish child.”

“That was only because he knew I was coming.” Perhaps fed up with the winds of hatred that billowed at her, Vera had risen to the bait.

“I wonder about that. Tell me, D: if the doctor or I hadn’t been there, would you have seen to the kid? Of course not!”

Her look of hatred faded away unexpectedly. D had gotten up.

“You may not have any medicine to treat pneumonia, but you have something I want. Can I have it?” he asked the doctor.

“Oh, could my meager equipment be of some use, I wonder?”

“Just a heat pack. They only had one at the general store. Apparently they’ll be getting more in tomorrow.”

“Well, I’ll be—I had no idea you were so sensitive to the cold. Will

ten hold you?"

"One will be fine."

"Aren't you polite!"

Producing the red package from her pack on the floor, the doctor gave it to D, who then did something unexpected. He rolled up his left sleeve. An identical heat pack was wrapped around his wrist.

Both Vera and Lilia donned expressions that seemed to say, *What's pretty boy up to now?*

Taking off the old heat pack and tossing it down a nearby garbage chute, he tore open the new one and wrapped it around his left wrist. As the two women inundated him with looks of suspicion, the Hunter made a fist, then opened it again.

Apparently no longer able to bear it, Lilia said, "What kind of hocus-pocus is this?"

"I'm sensitive to the cold." As he said that, D bent his wrist back far, then slammed the palm of his hand against the wall hard enough for them to hear a snap. A low groan rang out. The eyes of both women, wide with astonishment, followed the source of that voice and came to rest on Lourié.

D headed for the washroom. It was located beside the bath. The reason there was such an amenity here although the Nobility inherently loathed running water was simple: they were for human women who hadn't yet been turned into vampires. In one era, Nobles had brought human beauties with them like pets. They were a kind of status symbol.

He passed his left hand under the infrared water faucet, palm up. Water flowed from the faucet. Boiling-hot water. D peered down silently at the palm of his hand as transparent droplets bounced off it and steam wafted up. Ten seconds passed, then twenty—there was only the endless sound of running water, and D himself seemed to dissolve into the very flow of time. When three minutes had passed, the palm of his left hand had only turned slightly pinkish, but ripples passed through it and a tiny pit opened. The hot water flowed into it. Another thirty seconds passed, and suddenly there was a choked cough, like a living creature spitting up water, and warm water shot back up.

And then a hoarse voice drawled, "What . . . are you doing?"

"Nobles target their victims while they're asleep."

"Hmm."

"Awake yet?"

"Not yet . . . Cold . . . So cold . . ." Here it let out a big yawn.

By the look of things, the countenanced carbuncle in the Hunter's left hand had trouble with the cold. For that reason, it made sense that as he climbed in the fierce blizzard, D had fallen into the illusion beast's trap.

"I have a job for you. Drink a little more to clear your head."

Once again the hot water sprayed everywhere.

"Knock it off! Would you quit it, already! I'm already sharp as a

tack.” These tiny shouts rang out mere seconds later.

“I simply can’t believe it,” Vera said, making no attempt to mask the admiration in her voice or in her eyes.

Just a few minutes earlier she’d watched with her own eyes as D put his left hand to the boy’s chest, and the child’s temperature had dropped rapidly, his breathing had returned to normal, and his perspiring had ceased. There were things from the days when the Nobility’s sorcery and witchcraft held sway that even now the strictest of doctors wouldn’t acknowledge. However, the phenomenon she’d just witnessed was impossible from the standpoint of physics—in other words, it could be called a miracle.

“Dhampirs can do things like that?”

D met the query from the stunned doctor with silence. Perhaps he meant that seeing was believing.

Lilia and Dust had already gone to bed. Only the two of them remained in the refuge’s living room.

“Even at my age, I still don’t know much about the Nobility,” said Vera, slumping back against the sofa wearily. Slapping the polished ebony armrest with her palm, she continued, “It all looks so real—this sofa, the table, and you.” From between chapped lips that hadn’t been adorned with lipstick for a long time, a thin breath escaped. “I mean, this refuge has ten more rooms to it! But with one press of a switch, it folds up smaller than an umbrella. Honestly, instead of hating the Nobility for their deeds, I’m more impressed by this—oh, do you mind if I smoke?”

Taking a crinkled paper pack from the chest pocket of her coat, she pulled a cigarette out before putting the rest away. She rubbed the end of the cigarette against the armrest, and it sparked to life.

“You a heavy smoker?”

Vera coughed furiously. The voice had been hoarse. Striking her chest a few times to get her breathing back under control, she said, “You’re quite the ventriloquist, aren’t you? But I can’t say I care for your tastes.”

D squeezed his left hand into a tight fist. The low voice was cut off.

“I went to college in the western Frontier, where I studied medicine and physics. As a result, I believe I know a little something about the scientific level of what the Nobles left behind and the substance of their civilization. The world may be guided by the will of the living, but it’s science that supports those efforts. Even hundreds of thousands of years from now, human beings probably won’t have reached the same level as

the Nobility. Yet those same Nobles are now in their sunset. Are civilization and science such fleeting things? No, even with eternal life, they can't stop the end of the world. What, then, is the meaning of life?"

"What do you think?" D inquired softly. Vera's form was reflected in his deep, dark eyes.

The doctor hesitated a bit, taking a long drag of her cigarette, then slowly exhaling it. The smoke swelled like a mushroom, then quickly faded. Gazing at D, Vera said, "The meaning of life is . . . dying."

Nothing from the Hunter.

"Or perhaps it would be better to say that being limited gives life purpose. It means people have to find a purpose for their own life. Even if they don't always find one."

"Everything finite comes to an end someday," said D. A faint look of desolation flitted across his handsome visage. "In that respect, there's no difference between humans and Nobles."

"No, there's a fundamental difference. Human beings can create life. For all their ageless immortality, the Nobility can't do that. All they can do is drain humans of their blood and add them to their ranks. But they're—"

"That, too, is a new life."

Vera fell silent. She'd encountered similar situations before. That experience allowed her to choose the best response in a heartbeat.

III

"I don't really understand what you're saying."

In the span of that one remark, the doctor's brain was cycling through thousands of questions and answers. *What are you saying? What do you mean by new life? New in what sense? How is that considered life?* The answer came from a pitch-black region of the mind yet unmapped by cerebral physiology.

"D, do you mean to say becoming one of the Nobility is a form of living?"

"Perhaps it's a new life."

"Don't kid me." Vera smacked her right fist down on the armrest. Though a sharp pain ran all the way up to her shoulder, she didn't notice it. Her whole body was hot. She wasn't even aware that this was due to her anger. "And just how did you reach that conclusion? Those who are bitten by Nobles and join their ranks—they share the same loathsome thirst for blood, and seek it out. If that's not a demon, what is?"

"Your kind also dines, do they not? Nobles drink blood—where's the

difference?"

"There's a huge difference. They drink *human* blood! The person they feed on dies once. Then they become one of them. They'll never know rest for all eternity."

"Dying and then rising again. You wouldn't call that a new life?"

"It's not life. Nobles and their former victims aren't alive, but they're not dead either. They're known forever more as *the living dead*."

"What of the Nobles, then?" D inquired in a tone that remained as still as a winter's night.

"They're—" Vera began, but she had nothing after that.

"Do you know whether or not they too have died and come back? Have you ever considered this: if they were dead from the very start, yet they moved, and thought, and even created a civilization, wouldn't you consider them a new form of life?"

The doctor shook her head vehemently. Her thoughts wouldn't gel. D expressed a view that she couldn't deny had occurred to her before. However, now she would give anything to crush that heretical doctrine.

"Nobles can't walk in the light of day."

"There are exceptions."

"Nobles sleep through the day in coffins."

"And humans sleep through the night in beds."

"They drink blood."

"Humans eat meat. But when they take a life, it can't rise again."

"The life that rises again is cursed! Just like the Nobility!"

"Condemning the existence of the Nobility without understanding them isn't the sort of thing anyone who professes to be a person of science should be doing."

"I know the Nobility better than anyone." Vera's voice suddenly became low. "My mother was employed in a Noble's mansion. They paid her salary, and they promised her that no one would suck her blood. The master of the house kept that promise. But the first time one of his guests laid eyes on my mother—well, she tried to run, but her throat was torn open, and she died. I'll never forgive the Nobility."

"My, my!" a hoarse voice remarked in amazement.

In the clever eyes of the doctor, hatred swirled in dark whirlpools.

Instances of Nobles hiring humans for a set period of time and then returning them to their homes were extremely rare outside the Capital. In the present era (when the meanings of the terms BC and AD had been lost), records existed of the contracts entered into from the year 5000 to 7500—with the stipulation that blood not be drunk—and the number of humans employed by the Nobility in that time frame totaled 7,628 for the entire Frontier. A large number of contracts were destroyed by Noble-hating humans, so precise numbers weren't available, but roughly ninety-five percent of those contracts were satisfactorily completed—a fact that was in those days (and in the present as well) a major blow to

scholars of the anti-Noble faction. At that time, the traditional view that the Nobility saw human beings only as food was badly shaken. However, for all the scholars of the pro-Noble faction who asserted that the Nobility's cruelty and blood drinking were an inescapable destiny imprinted in their very DNA, some twenty-three hundred years later new excavations had unearthed truths that came as a great shock. Thanks to other contracts and the journals of Nobles from that same time frame, it became known that for every contract completed satisfactorily, three times as many had been horribly breached. After that, the anti-Noble faction's predominance was unshaken, and continued so in the present day. As far as humans were concerned, the Nobility were demons who'd ruled over them for nearly ten millennia.

"They're the same," D said, his voice flowing out in a low tone. As always, it was cold and boundlessly dark. "Science isn't satisfied with merely observing phenomena. It's the spirit of finding the truth that lies behind them—in demonstrating facts. You might even say it's supported by the imagination. Have you never considered, Doctor, that it's possible for Nobles and humans to live together?"

"Huh?" Vera replied, apparently dumbstruck. "Excuse me? *What?*" The doctor shook her head fiercely. "Wait just a minute. Not once have I —"

"Don't lie."

The doctor froze. D's words would gouge out her heart and lungs, turning blood to ice before it could spray forth. "I'm not lying. You're wrong. Why do you think I'd lie?"

"I can tell from the way you've been looking at *this* guy ever since we met."

The doctor blinked stupidly. D's voice had become the hoarse tone of another person entirely.

"Your average person just kinda loses themself in the sight. But underneath that, there's a fear they can't hide. A racial memory carved into humans' bones—not even you can do anything about that. But the way you look at him is different. You've got the look of someone who understands him. Fundamentally different from those in the pro-Noble school, who are merely superficial, you have the eyes of one who's struggled to understand the true nature of the Nobility and ultimately wrested free the truth. Even the tragedy that's befallen you can't shake that. No matter what evil purpose it might be put to, the truth of $E = mc^2$ doesn't change. You know it."

Vera was stunned. It took her a good ten seconds before she could say anything. "No . . . Now *that's* a lie . . . As long as I live, I'll hate . . ."

Her body began to tremble. The shaking grew finer and finer still, and then her body became a blur. She had surpassed the limits of the human body's ability to shake.

"What in the world is she—" the hoarse voice muttered in

amazement. “A physical and mental transformation brought on through molecular vibrations—I’ve never seen the like.”

What was taking place in the body of that ordinary country doctor?

At any rate, the shaking gradually subsided. Her blurred outlines resolved into one, the tremors themselves ceased, and Vera flopped back against the sofa.

“What the hell? Don’t make such a fuss over her.”

Despite the hoarse voice’s objections, D picked Vera up and laid her flat on the sofa.

“Leave her be. Dirty little tease,” the voice grumbled.

“When the spirit and flesh separate, do they both stay the same as they were before?” D asked.

“Nope. Some say they become like a whole different person. But I haven’t seen it for myself.”

“In what way?”

“Let me see . . . The most ordinary woman in the world could turn into the greatest liar of all time, or something like that, I guess?”

Nothing from the Hunter.

“This is serious, like holding a snake to your bosom. One of them’s a woman and a warrior at the same time; the other’s a doctor. Both of ’em consciously hate vampires. One alone could be trouble, but if the two of ’em were to team up, that’s about as dangerous as it comes. Why not put her down here and now? Ouff!”

As D was squeezing his hand into a fist, Lilia and Dust came running in, having sensed something unusual. They had longsword and club in hand. As for Crey—it seemed he was sleeping.

“What in blazes happened?” Dust asked, looking down at where the semiconscious Vera lay on the sofa.

“Not a thing,” said the hoarse voice. “She’s sleeping like a baby.”

“What? I got up for this?” said Lilia, letting out a great yawn.

No sooner had the killing lust left Dust than D asked, “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Lilia listened intently, then blinked a few times and said, “Nothing—what, is there something outside?”

“I can’t see anything,” Dust said with a shake of his head as he peered out the window.

“Must’ve imagined it.”

At that hoarse remark, Lilia shrugged her shoulders. “Troublemaker. If you’re going to put the bite on someone, try to keep it quiet.”

“The doc—what happened to her?” Dust asked from beside the sofa.

“Just a tad anemic,” the hoarse voice replied. “She’ll be fine soon.”

“That’s not it. It’s not anemia, with that color in her face,” Lilia interrupted. Training a sharp gaze on Vera’s neck, she continued, “Her carotid artery’s fine, but just to be safe she should be stripped naked and checked. After all, we’re dealing with a dhampir here.”

"You did this to her?" Dust's eyes gleamed.

"I suppose I did," D replied, this time in his own voice.

"When the doctor wakes up, I'm gonna ask her what happened. Depending on the answer, you might be in a world of hurt." His rough hands tightened on his club.

"Nothing happened," Vera said, sitting up on the sofa.

"You okay, Doc?" Dust asked, stealing a glance at her before quickly returning his gaze to D.

"Just a little anemic. I'm not much good in the cold. Lilia, I'll thank you to choose your words more carefully."

"What's this—you're on *his* side all of a sudden? Well, that must be because he's so damn handsome."

"*Excuse* me?" The doctor's wrathful countenance made the warrior woman shrug her shoulders.

"Okay, I'm sorry. That was out of line. But Mr. Bodyguard, you should look the doctor over from head to toe." Swishing her tail, the Huntress returned to her room.

"You can go too, Dust."

"But—"

"I'll be fine. He doesn't seem to have much interest in humans. Particularly in women." Vera was even able to smile at that. "Surely you don't really suspect he's sucked my blood, do you?"

The giant of a man gave D a withering glare, looked once again at Vera, then promptly left.

"Ain't that a cold guard man. We've got a vampire panic here, and he'd walk away from the culprit and the victim?"

At the disgusted tone of the hoarse voice, a bitter grin rose to Vera's lips. "It's okay, don't trouble yourself about it. Forget that—what could've happened to me?"

"Nothing. You just fainted from anemia. You should call it a night. I'll sleep out here."

"I really do like this voice better than that other one," Vera said, scratching her head. "And you intend to watch over the child as well? But you're the one who needs to rest. Doctor's orders."

"Have it your way."

As if his previous remark about sleeping there had been a fabrication, D headed for the door. He stepped out into the hall. It wasn't a narrow passageway. One touch of a switch on the wall and a window opened—or rather, it came into being. Sunlight-loathing Nobles still liked to enjoy the night scenery. However, the existence of windows would let in the light of day. This was the resulting compromise.

Gazing out at a world where the blizzard raged like a crazed white demon, the hoarse voice said, "They're out there, aren't they? Tomorrow our trip's gonna be rough."

Naturally there was no reply. No matter what kind of trip it was, it

could do nothing to deter this gorgeous young man from his course—or so his silence seemed to declare.

The window closed.

A number of presences that'd stayed frozen while D gazed at them finally began wriggling around out in the snow again but were immediately swallowed up by the howling blizzard.

The Ill-Fated Search

chapter 4

I

Perhaps you could say the good omens continued. It was just shortly after daybreak that sunlight and blue sky began spreading behind the blizzard. About the same time, Lourié woke up. His color had returned, and his mind was sharp. He gave them a smile that suggested his body was in good shape as well.

"Sure you're not in any pain?" Vera asked, to which he answered in the affirmative, nodding exuberantly. After some reflection Vera called Dust over and said, "Our friend here is going to bring you down off the mountain."

"I don't want to go," the boy replied, pursing his lips tightly and shaking his head.

"Well, to be honest, you're just slowing us down."

"I know that. That's why I started up alone in the first place."

"Going it alone is all well and good, but if anything were to happen to you, we'd have to go rescue you. You're not alone anymore."

"Please, just go on ahead. That way, if something happens to me, you won't know about it. All you have to do is keep moving straight ahead, and not turn around."

"You know we couldn't do that." Vera let out a sigh. Her patience was wearing thin. Yet the boy had an earnestness to his manner that tempered her anger. "When we found you, you said you'd come looking for your father who was lost up here, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Is that really all there is to it?"

"Yes—why do you ask?" Lourié had lowered his gaze for a moment, but now he looked at the doctor again.

"There are other people in the village who've had family go missing on the mountain. There are parents who've lost children. But you don't see them out searching at this time of year."

"You're right."

"Yet you try to make the climb with a blizzard raging—well, at any rate, we're with you there. But you said you'd search for your father alone. I believe you're serious. And that's what worries me. So, did your father really just disappear?"

"That's right."

Vera looked the boy in the eye. He immediately averted his gaze. The doctor knew what that meant in an instant, but not the details. Pressing the matter any further would only make the boy more recalcitrant.

"I guess we have no choice then." Vera heaved a sigh. "At the moment, it's possible to safely go down the mountain."

She turned toward the door and started to walk away. Her course took her behind Lourié. The doctor's right hand came to rest on the base of his slender neck, where she pressed the anesthetic gun she'd hid in her sleeve. Quickly catching the boy as he slumped forward, she had Dust lay him on his back.

"Get him down quickly," she told the man, filling him in on the decision she'd made the day before.

The giant nodded. Even so, he hesitated. "I'm supposed to be guarding you, Doc."

"If the boy were to do something stupid, it'd put me in danger as well. Getting him back to the village is the very best protection you can offer me."

The giant said nothing at that.

"Please. Leave while the others are still sleeping."

"Roger that."

"And once you've done that, you're not to come back here. Am I understood?"

Silence once more from the giant.

"Please. I don't want you to end up like your daughter. Your wife cursed me to her dying breath."

Again, nothing from Dust.

"What's more, if anything were to befall you, it would pain me for all my days. And I'd hate those in the village office who picked you as my protector."

The doctor spat out her confession like a gout of blood, but it didn't bring so much as a twitch from the stony face of the giant. All it wore was a cold blankness that surpassed even hatred.

What had happened between the doctor and her protector?

"I'll be back," Dust said flatly. He understood what the doctor was saying but didn't agree with it; that much was plain to Vera as well. To him, Vera was someone to be protected and nothing more. Toward that end, it would be best to bring the boy home. He'd decided that, and nothing more. "But if I don't make it . . ."

"Don't worry. I'm capable of defending myself. Besides, if it comes to that, I don't think the other three will leave me to my own defenses."

Dust fell silent, proof he doubted Vera's claims. Two Hunters and an outlaw—when push came to shove, they seemed to him to be the last people in the world who'd give a thought to anyone else's safety. However, about ten minutes later the village guardian left the Noble's

refuge with the soundly sleeping Lourié on his back.

Before even five minutes had passed, Lilia got up, came into the room, and said, "Hey, where's the kid?" But before she'd even finished saying the words, the Huntress got a gleam in her eyes. "Don't tell me you sent them back to the village."

"It's still close enough to go back. Besides, the boy's just going to be in the way later."

"Looks like you'll be even more trouble, Doctor!" Lilia spat venomously. "Do you think this is a secure area? All night long I sensed things moving around out there. You've as good as sent them to their deaths!"

"It can't be . . ." Vera heard a series of regulated explosions within her—the sound of her heart.

"When exactly did they leave?"

"About five minutes ago!"

"Then we might still be in time. I'm heading right out after them. You stay here. D?" she called out. "D!"

Still shouting toward the door, the Huntress moved into the living room with the gait of a predator about to pounce on its prey. Before ten seconds had passed, she returned, saying, "He's not here." She groaned the words, as if biting off a chunk of her own fate. "What the hell is he doing?"

At this point she put on her poker face. "Well, that's one or two fewer children around. Good riddance, I say!" And with that, she added, "This is a hell of a way to roll out of bed. I'm going to go see if I can catch up to them. It sure would help if the big fella was carrying some sort of radio, though."

"Unfortunately, no."

Lilia clucked her tongue and slapped the hilt of the longsword she carried.

At that point Crey poked his sleepy-eyed head in and asked, "Hey, what's going on?"

"The right man at the right time!" Lilia said, looking fit to lick her chops with anticipation.

"Come again?"

Before they'd gone five hundred yards Crey was grumbling complaints to himself. Something about how he hated wandering around out in the cold. "I'm tired. And I like it back at the refuge."

"That's *my* refuge, thank you. If you fancy pitching a tent outside

tonight, by all means, go on back."

"You lousy bitch. That's extortion."

Ignoring the way the outlaw bared his teeth, she looked off into the distance for footprints in the snow. "The tracks are here, no problem. At least we've got something to go on. If you call yourself a man, stop your bellyaching and follow me."

"Shit!" Crey said, and as he did so he made a strange face. "Hey, what about that son of a bitch D? Come to think of it, he wasn't in the refuge, but there's no tracks from him either. Wonder if the jerk ran off in the dead of night."

"No."

"You sound pretty damn sure of yourself."

"Over there!"

Crey focused his eyes in the direction Lilia had indicated with a toss of her chin. Just where an incline began, two figures were headed toward them.

"Why's there two of 'em?" Crey said, and then he swiftly tensed, and at the same time understood.

The two figures at the bottom of the incline slowly took the form of D and Dust. Lourié was over Dust's shoulder. When Dust's rough features became discernible, the outlaw said, "Was the big fella's face always that red?"

"This is bad!"

Lilia broke into a run, the snow tripping her up. Not only Dust's face, but his whole upper body as well, was stained with fresh blood.

"Is the kid okay?"

Dust nodded. A flesh-toned plaster had been applied to the split in his forehead. It was an antiseptic product. Vera had most likely given it to him.

"And the boy never the wiser—lucky little brat," said Lilia.

On Dust's back, Lourié slumbered peacefully, not yet roused from the anesthetic.

Quickly turning her gaze to Dust's face, she said, "That's not such a serious wound. Who gave it to you?"

"Snow bugs."

That was a kind of three-foot-long insect that built its nests in the snow. Due to their being entirely white, they were hard to pick out. Their weapons were teeth and claws. Both were sharp, for carving smaller insects out of the ice, but due to their sluggish movements, a well-equipped human could hold their own against up to five of them.

"How many were there?"

"A good five dozen."

"And you got off with just that?"

Dust gave a toss of his chin to the figure of beauty beside him. "I'd put down thirty-two, and number thirty-three got me. That's when he

came along." His expression and tone were the very picture of unsociability, but there was a glow of gratitude in his eyes.

More dazzling than the snowfields, the one he referred to kept his silence.

"They may be a little on the slow side, but those claws move ten times faster than a man. And there he was, taking out five at a time, six swipes of his sword to finish the lot without taking even a scratch. I'm not sure which one's the monster. I'd never seen what a dhampir could do before."

As they walked side by side, Lilia asked D, "So, Mr. Dhampir, mind if I put a question to you?"

"That depends."

Furrowing her brow at the hoarse tone, she said, "What were you doing outside? Don't tell me you noticed the two of them had gone and went after them."

"That's the ticket," the hoarse voice croaked.

Lilia said nothing at that.

"Truth be told, I'm a big softy. Sweet natured—oh, it's a *beautiful* thing, heh heh heh!" The chortling ended in a choked cry of pain.

His left hand still balled in a fist, D said, "I was surveying the area."

"I expected as much. No way a man like you'd be worried about anyone else. After all, you're a little prince descended from the blood of the Nobility."

There was a stark flash before her eyes. A clang rang out, accompanied by sparks. D's blade was stopped right in front of Lilia's nose by her dagger. It quickly came away.

While D sheathed his blade as if nothing had happened and started to walk away in silence, she called out after him, "Was that supposed to be some sort of threat? Sorry, but I'm a pro, too. Still, it was pretty good. I didn't even have time to draw my longsword. You'll get your payback when this job is finished."

"Let it go."

"*What?*" With that angry question, Lilia turned and found Dust, who was also about to walk away. "Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Without halting, he said in a grave tone, "I'm surprised he let you live. Treated you like a lady, I guess. He's a softy, that much is for sure. But a softy to be feared."

"Take that back. I stopped his sword," Lilia retorted, unable to restrain herself. Her pride as a Hunter was at stake.

"Because he cut you in a way that would allow you to stop him."

"*Allow* me to stop him? And what's this about cutting me?"

Lowering his left hand, Dust rubbed the tip of her nose with his index finger. "Get that taken care of. It'll spoil your looks."

"Just a—" she shouted to him as he walked away with the child

strapped to his back, but then the Huntress noticed something out of the ordinary. Feeling an itch, she touched her index finger to her face, then held it out in front of her eyes.

"It can't be," she groaned in a low voice. It was a tone she'd never heard herself use, full of surprise, fear, and despair.

Her fingertip was damp with red. It was Lilia's own lifeblood, trickling from the wound D's blade had dealt her.

II

It was an hour later that the whole group set out. Once they'd partaken of some of the emergency rations the refuge was stocked with for humans, it only took thirty seconds to pack up the refuge. On seeing how the structure folded up into something the size of a slim music player with one press of a switch, Crey whistled.

"That was a hell of a thing for 'em to make. Were the Nobles into mountain climbing in the snow, too? You know, because it was there? I bet they enjoyed skiing in winter." Clutching his belly, Crey laughed. "What do you think, D? Picture it: pretty boys with fangs in black capes and women in evening dresses getting in a little night skiing. Laugh it up. C'mon! Give us a smile."

Naturally, D didn't reply; he just walked on ahead of the rest.

"Hey, wait up!" Lilia was about to chase after him when a hand reached for her shoulder, but the woman's form spurted forward as if driven by a gust of air.

Crey was grinning. That was probably par for the course with him. "A long time ago, I went to this island nation that'd half sunk into the sea. They had this weird phenomenon, a kind of mirage they called 'the fleeing water.' Just when you were about to touch it, it'd be off in the distance again. You're 'the fleeing woman.' "

"In that case, try touching me," Lilia said, twisting her body provocatively.

"Maybe when you're a little more my type," he replied. "That reminds me—is D alive?"

"What?" Lilia looked at the outlaw as if he'd lost his mind. Then a spiteful look rose on her face, and she replied, "Only half, I suppose."

"That explains it."

"Explains what?"

Crey tossed his chin in the direction of the snow. "Pretty as a picture. Not a track on it."

There was no reply.

Those behind him—the doctor and her protector with the

burdensome boy—also looked down at the pristine snow, then turned their eyes toward D with unsettled looks on their faces.

Did the sunlight of this fair day wish to conspire with him? Or was it that the endless silvery expanse would expel him, eternally cursed as he was? Whatever the case, no trace of the figure in black could be seen any longer.

"Heeeeeeeeey!"

The shout was in a man's voice. D halted, started to turn around, and then halted again.

"What is it?" asked the hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hand.

"If I turn around, my head will fly."

"What?"

"I'm walking on the course."

"The course? Damn, I didn't know that was there. You've got to get off to one side."

"It's no use. Once you're on this route, you could walk forever. We've got to somehow find the exit."

"Hmm. I hadn't even noticed. When in the blazes did we . . ."

"You're useless," D said, his tone colder than ice and snow.

"Shit. The cold air's dulled my senses. What'll we do?"

"All we can do is go on."

"Is their sword faster than yours?"

"It'd be close. But if my head were cut off, I'd need to be brought back to life. Could you manage that?"

The hoarse voice hesitated. What came next was a distressed groan. "To be honest, my eyelids are feeling pretty heavy. I'd appreciate it if you could pull through this on your own."

"Useless." D's tone was cold, but there was no blame in it. Even without his left hand and the hoarse voice, the young man could go it alone. However, the path passed by a rocky ridge. Would it lead to death before he reached it?

"What'll you do?" the hoarse voice asked, even hoarser than usual.

D walked on without replying. Features gorgeous enough to shame the white snow showed no change, nor did his stride alter. It was only three more yards to the ridge. Two yards. One. Now, just a few more—

The wind whistled behind him. The sound raced toward D's neck. A flash of light met it. Fresh blood sailed into the air, tingeing the snow. D's blood. He pressed his left hand to the right side of his neck. Blood poured from his wrist, and from there it sailed up into the air, scattering red spots six or seven feet ahead of him. The gleam returned to D's hand. A dazzling sword blade.

Down on the snow, groans of pain rang out. If they'd known they issued from the Hunter's severed left hand, whoever was behind him would've lost their nerve.

D moved swiftly, pressing the stump at the end of his arm to the wrist where it stuck out of the snow. He raised the limb. All five fingers worked normally. He then pressed it to the wound on his neck. Although D had brought his left hand up to shield his neck, the blade of his unseen foe had still cut him. But the lifeblood spouting from it stopped dead. His left hand came away. Only a thin red line remained there.

"You did it!" exclaimed the hoarse voice from his left hand. "You wiped it out without ever seeing it or knowing what it was. It's stuff like this that makes me not wanna be around you in the mountains, at the sea, or anywhere. Still, it was a hell of a mountain beast to be a match for you in speed. And the way you closed on it like you didn't give a . . ."

The voice petered out.

Quickly, its tone became angry. "I don't care how badly you wanted to keep your head from getting lopped off, you're an idiot for using me as a shield. Thanks to you, I'm in a world of pain! Hey, where are you going?"

D had begun walking back across the snow the way he'd come.

"It wasn't destroyed."

"What?"

"I cut it in a vital spot, but it'll take a moment for it to succumb to the wound. That moment is the problem."

"Oh, you can't be serious. They're coming!"

D was walking right toward them. He hadn't been walking for five minutes when five figures came into view on the snowfield before him. Even the boy was walking again.

"Can you sense its presence?" asked D.

"Nope."

At that frank reply, D quickened his pace.

"Oh!" the hoarse voice exclaimed, sounding both surprised and impressed.

Though Crey and Lilia looked for all the world to be casually ambling along, they'd leapt to either side in unison. An instant later, they had knife and longsword in hand. No one had even seen them draw. Their movements were like a jump in a spliced piece of film. But something unseen sent a cry of pain into the air.

"They did it," the left hand groaned from the vicinity of D's waist. "Seems you're not the only one here good enough to lay into something that can't be seen or sensed. And there's two of 'em, at that."

"Hey, did you see that, stud?" Crey called out, hand cupped beside his mouth.

The group came running over. The boy was at the fore.

"You must've seen that just now, right? One jab of my knife!"

"Oh my, that was nice work," the left hand replied. "But the goddess here apparently begs to differ."

Alone, Lilia walked over magnanimously, but when she finally joined them, she glared at Crey. “I’m sure you aren’t claiming all the credit, or are you?”

“You’re a fine one to be making claims to the contrary. It was my knife that did the trick. You know, kid, that thing was going for you. And your good buddy Crey saved your bacon. I hope you appreciate that.”

“How would the kid know? You’re the lowest of the low, stacking one lie on top of the next. Scum!”

“Oh, you’ve got some nerve, saying that. You trying to tell me it was that little trinket of yours that saved the kid?”

“Well, it was faster than that butter knife of yours, at least.”

“Perfect!” Crey grinned, taking his hand off Lourié’s head. “I haven’t liked you from the get-go. I’ll show you what a woman’s place is!”

“Oh, that sounds like a fun proposal. I was just thinking how a certain talentless, brainless man needed to learn his place.”

The Huntress and the outlaw, two people who could never have been expected to understand each other, were enveloped in the air that suited them best—the lust for blood. Lourié was frozen in his tracks, but the doctor wrapped her arms around him from behind. The wind that blustered by carried the chill of the ice fields. Even colder than that was the murderous intent that seemed to freeze even the form of the Hunter of unearthly beauty.

III

“Hey,” the hoarse voice asked in a low tone, “are you sure you don’t wanna stop this? Now, I’m well aware you didn’t come back because you were worried about them. You came to take care of that wounded monster, right? Still, this is getting serious. Why don’t you stop ’em?”

From D—silence.

After that, the hoarse voice continued in a disgusted tone, “Don’t tell me you wanna see what the two of ’em can do. One’s gonna end up dead! Hell, if things go badly, maybe both of ’em.”

Not so much as an eyebrow raised in that heavenly visage as it gazed at the man and woman squaring off. *So beautiful, and so cold. Is that what you are, D?*

However, the truth was made an eternal mystery by the sound of something slashing through the air. And not just one thing. It was the light whistle of innumerable things closing from above. A gleam danced out. Sparks flew, and a metallic clang traveled across the ice fields. All around the group, steel arrows struck the ground. There had to be at

least fifty of them.

"Who the hell is it?" Crey said, looking ahead and to the right.

"The mountain folk, I'd say." Lilia was facing in the same direction.

"Set up the refuge," D instructed her.

"No, they'll ruin it. It cost me a fortune!"

As Lilia turned away in a snit, Vera shouted, "We've got a child here!"

At the same time there was the report of a rifle, and something hot scraped past the Huntress's cheek. Everyone but D dove to the ground.

"That does it!" Lilia reached for the folded refuge tucked through her belt. There was no other option.

D's right hand came up. In the same direction Lilia and Crey had looked, a succession of cries D alone could hear rang out. He'd thrown his rough wooden needles. More than a hundred yards away, a number of red splotches spread on the snow.

"Not too shabby," Crey said, and when he turned there was a gleam in his eye. Had he known the weapons that'd flown over a hundred yards were light, slim needles of wood, he might've wet himself. A fresh gunshot made him turn his head once more. "Sons of bitches! They've got rifles."

"I can't see them."

"That's what the mountain folk around here are known for. They wear chameleon suits." Vera's words explained the mystery.

Chameleon suits were clothing that mimicked certain animals' ability to make their bodies blend in with the coloring of their surroundings. Just as black clothes let one meld with the darkness, these suits would make the wearer suddenly disappear from view. Moreover, they took away the perception of depth, making it impossible to spot them. In the endless expanse of white, a foe like this could close on their prey more easily than a snow panther, then strike with their weapons. It was said that if they could maintain a certain distance, the outcome of the battle was one hundred percent clear.

"Hey, get down!" Dust shouted to the Hunter.

"Leave him be," said Crey.

"He's a dhampir!" Lilia added.

Apparently this was something that the two of them could agree upon. This exchange exposed the natures of the three people.

When D bent down, shots zinged over his head. Three of them.

"Six, all told," the hoarse voice whispered.

"A scouting party," said Lilia. "Leave this to me."

"Quit it. You'd just piss yourself!"

A look burning with fierce flames of loathing speared Crey. "You're going to regret saying that soon!"

"Sorry, but the only thing I regret is being born into this sorry world."

"Knock it off!" Dust growled in a low voice, and then Lilia stood up.

"What?" someone gasped—Lilia herself.

One step ahead of her, the figure in black dashed by, his right hand swinging around behind him, filling not only his own field of view with white but Lilia's too. That slash of D's blade had thrown up a cloud of snow. While it allowed the hot lead to pass, the snow closed on the gunshots like a storm. No doubt the marksmen had underestimated D's group. After all, it seemed impossible to pinpoint the shooters' location by the sound of their gunshots alone. D's needles had already slain four of them. And gunshots had rung out since.

A white whirlwind arose in one section of the snowfield. Suddenly it changed to crimson, and two red figures fell without a word and writhed in the snow.

"Oh!" The hoarse voice was directed at Lilia, who was beside D and had just made a swipe with her longsword. Fresh blood spattered across the snow.

"I won't have you grabbing all the glory!"

Perhaps the hoarse voice's cry was a reaction to her smile. At last she had an opportunity to display her skill—her smile said as much. And this woman, too, was a gorgeous warrior.

"Well? Ready to admit I'm every bit as good as you are?"

"Idiot."

Lilia turned around indignantly. She was greeted by Crey's sarcastic smirk.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Crey gave a wordless jerk of his chin toward D, who was stripping a coat from a man's bloodied corpse.

"See? He struck his opponents in the head, so that the chameleon suits could be used. You, on the other hand, had to be the showboat and cut them open from the base of the neck down to the lungs. A coat we could've used, down the shitter. That's the kind of dumb move I'd expect from a woman."

"Now you've done it, you cheap little thug!"

A vortex of hatred radiated from every inch of Lilia. And Crey held a gleaming knife in his right hand.

However, the showdown between the incompatible compatriots was unavoidably interrupted by a grave masculine voice. "Stop. When the scouting party doesn't return, it won't be long before more mountain folk come. This is no time for squabbling among ourselves—look!"

Their eyes nearly popped out of their heads as they followed Dust's gaze, colored first by amazement—and then anger.

Carrying an essentially undamaged chameleon suit and a rifle over one shoulder, D had started walking toward the ridge.

"That bastard's just doing his own thing." Crey's tone was neutral, his anger having passed.

"Let's go," Dust called to Vera and Lourié, stepping forward with solemn strides.

"Oh, hell. Next time, then," Crey spat, following after them.

"Damn it all," Lilia said, and she was just about to press forward when Dust and Vera turned to face her.

"There's another set of gear."

"Oh—the refuge," she said.

Lilia halted, and with seeming trepidation she began to turn her face to the left. The black dome of the refuge she'd set up at D and Vera's request loomed on the snowfield. Folding it up was quick enough. With a glum expression, Lilia followed the group with her gaze, watching as they walked away without a backward glance, and then, with resignation, bending over the corpse of a fallen bandit.

"Just beyond that ridge, they say that's the area where Gilzen's castle was. You should consider this whole region a danger zone. No, make that hell. Those behind you would be better off turning back if they still can—or is it too late?"

"It's too late," D replied as he advanced, steadily planting one foot after the other but doing it so lightly he didn't leave a single track. Although this young man wasn't the kind to care about the life or death of others, even for him the reply surpassed coldness and entered the spectrum of cruelty.

The group following him was a good five hundred yards back, and D was now about halfway up the five-hundred-foot-high ridge of rock. Suddenly, he halted. His right foot barely pressed against the snow.

"Step on a mine?" his left hand asked drowsily. "Put any more pressure on it, and it'll blow up. Back off, and you won't be able to get across. And you've got the others coming up behind you. So, what are you gonna do?" There was nothing helpful in the hoarse voice's somewhat mean-spirited inquiry.

A heartbeat later, the figure in black soared into the air like a mystic bird, landing a few yards away, then executing another leap. He came to rest on the snow some fifty yards distant.

"What the hell? Are you leaving the rest of 'em behind?"

As if in response to the hoarse voice's sullen tone, the ridge collapsed. Two of the places D's feet had touched had been depressions in the ground. In each spot, the rock and snow gave way to a depth of a hundred yards.

"They won't be able to follow you now. What are they supposed to

do if the mountain folk show up? Are you gonna feign ignorance and—" The hoarse voice cut out, and then in a somewhat pensive tone it added, "You could do that, couldn't you? But it might not do any good."

The meaning of that last remark was unclear.

D began to pick his way along the far side of the ridge. The mountain soaring before him appeared to quietly wait for the Hunter. It was thirty minutes more before the group behind him reached the horrid remains of the ridge.

Attackers

chapter 5

I

In front of D soared an almost perfectly vertical wall of rock and snow. From here on out, his limbs would serve as his only tools for the climb.

"Well, I'm sure you'll manage," his left hand muttered sleepily. "It's a good three hundred yards up to the rocky spot where that aircraft crash-landed. There's no lack of bumps and crevices to wrap your fingers around. The problem is over there."

Around two hundred yards from the top, the rockface jutted out more than thirty feet.

"That's not a problem for you. The real enemy—" the hoarse voice gave a yawn, "—is *this*."

Something white came to rest on the palm of his left hand, then abruptly vanished. A snowflake.

D turned to his right—northwest. Darkness was busy blanketing the sky. Like a strange gas, dark clouds were spreading toward them.

"From the look of that, inside of ten minutes this mountain's gonna be looking at a blizzard—or more like a hurricane of snow. Dangerous even for me. Good luck! Hurry up and wake me from this sleep."

"Now we're ready to start a little cold-weather training before winter sets in."

Silence descended. Then, a shocked voice inquired in a tone that might even be described as solemn, "That right there . . . Was that a . . . a *joke*?"

Saying nothing, D lowered the backpack from his shoulder and took out a single iron piton. Clenching it in his teeth, he approached the rockface. Apparently he'd already decided where he would start his climb.

Oh, but D was a sight to see! To climb a vertical wall of rock usually required a hammer, pitons, and vast quantities of rope. D challenged this rock wall with no rope to save him from a fall, no hammer to drive in pitons, and no more than that one piton, for that matter. It wasn't even clear if he intended to use it. In fact, he kept the piton between his teeth and reached out for the rock wall with both hands. If anyone had been there to see him, they'd likely have let out an admiring sigh. His hands reached for the rock, and without seeming to apply any force at all, he began climbing smoothly. Smoothly? Hell, he began to climb that

vertical rockface like a reptile that'd lived on that wall for millennia.

A hundred yards up, he reached the stony overhang. Not reducing speed in the slightest, he moved on to the underside of the rock. His fingers caught hold of the tiniest protrusions and reached into the faintest depressions. All his actions were carried out with lightning speed. Clinging to one knob, he reached his right hand out and touched another outcropping. The rock fell away beneath him. The Hunter arched his upper body like a bow. D moved with ungodly speed. Taking the piton from between his teeth with his left hand, he jammed it into the rockface. Of the footlong piece of iron, all but just enough to grip sank into the surface of the rock. Like a black bagworm, D hung there by one arm, but a heartbeat later his body became a spring, and he stuck to the rockface. Less than two seconds later, he began to move again.

After climbing another hundred yards, he found his back hammered by snowy winds that seemed to have been waiting just for him.

"Pretty much . . . made it . . . eh?" his left hand remarked torpidly. It sounded like someone babbling in their sleep. The wind and snow scattered the words.

D was standing on a fairly wide rock shelf. The emotion that should've been radiating from every inch of a gorgeous young man at such a moment wasn't evident in the least. Not even struggling for breath, without a single hint of emotion in his eyes, D was staring straight ahead—at an object that rested on its side about twenty yards away. With one wing sheared off and its fuselage crumpled, the savaged aircraft bore faint resemblance to its original form. He had finally arrived.

Heading toward it, D was walking across rock still bearing the scars of the crash landing when a faint sound reached his ears. Gunshots. For only a second he halted, turning his face toward the edge of the rock shelf, but he immediately turned back again and resumed walking forward.

After less than an hour of waiting at the base of the collapsed ridge, the group came under attack by the mountain folk. On seeing how few of them there were, the attackers should have unleashed a fierce fusillade —but they didn't. This wasn't like back on the snowfields. Here avalanches had to be taken into consideration. Instead, arrows rained down on them. Not surprisingly, both Lilia and Dust were able to deflect any that looked likely to hit themselves, but Dust had to protect Vera and Lourié as well. As he was defending them with javelin and axe, an arrow took him through the shoulder. Lilia clucked her tongue.

"Set up the refuge," Vera called out to her.

"No can do on this slope. Not enough room for its footprint. It'd fall down the ravine!"

"Should we charge 'em?"

Lilia grinned at Crey's suggestion. "Can you see who we're fighting?"

She was entirely correct. No matter how carefully they looked, they could see no sign of anyone out in the endless expanse of white. That was the chameleon suits at work.

"We're not dhampirs. We get our heads cut off, and that's all she wrote. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"What the hell are you trying to pull?"

"I've decided to do my job as best I can. Our association must end here."

"What?"

"Godspeed."

Knocking down more incoming arrows with her longsword, Lilia made an unexpected dash for the rocky ridge.

Lourié let out a scream.

Throwing herself off the collapsed ridge, the Huntress appeared to be committing suicide. In midair, a black globe appeared. The refuge. Lilia's form was engulfed by it. It would have been impossible to keep it from falling down the mountain if it were set up here, and she probably didn't have time enough to allow the others to get in as well, so her shocking solo effort was somewhat unavoidable. But would even the handiwork of the Nobles' civilization be able to survive a drop of several hundred yards into the ravine? Lilia was betting everything on it.

Snow billowed up from the bottom of the slope.

"Lousy bitch," Crey cursed as an arrow jabbed into the ground right in front of him.

"How are you faring?" Vera called out.

"I'm good," said Dust.

"You're not good. You can't use your right arm," Vera countered.

"Take the kid and run for it."

"Where?"

Crey somehow weathered the silence that came next. Their surroundings were already full of arrows. "How about we surrender?"

Dust shook his head at Crey's proposal. "You fancy being eaten?"

"What?"

"What do you think the mountain folk eat up on a snow-covered peak like this? The flesh of climbers and fugitives. I've heard when they don't have either of those, they draw lots to see who gets eaten."

"If they're as hungry as all that, why the hell don't they just move somewhere else, then?"

"I don't know much about their circumstances. But they say they were connected to the Nobles who used to live on this mountain."

"Hmm. Ever catch any of 'em down by the foot of the mountain?"

"Nope. We have found remains, though. The toothed-up bones of five or six of them."

"That's sick!"

Just then, the world darkened. As flecks of white blew around them, Crey groaned.

"Just perfect! A snowstorm!"

"Relax. At least we don't have to worry about the cold anymore."

Sensing something in Dust's tone, Crey glared at him. But he understood what the man was saying. Now that Lilia had run off and Dust was wounded, they wouldn't be able to hold off their attackers the next time there was an assault. No matter how good Crey was with his Deadman's Blade, an attack by invisible cannibals would spell certain death. A tinge of despair colored the outlaw's still-intrepid face.

"Tell me something, Doctor: does it hurt when you die?" Lourié asked in a trembling voice as Vera lay over him like a shield.

"It's all right," she said to him kindly. "It'll all be over soon."

Silence enveloped the white world. The next time the killing lust coalesced, death would be unleashed, falling down upon them.

"Damn it all!" Crey groaned. Did he still vainly cling to an urge to fight?

The darkness increased in depth.

A scream rang out. At the same time, the reports of rifles echoed in the air.

"What's that?" Crey twisted around with the agility of a beast.

Something had appeared on the snowfield ahead of them—where the mountain folk lurked. Crey could see one spot where the darkness was unnaturally heavy. Another scream resounded, so mindless it changed the looks on both Dust's and Vera's faces.

"Please, help me!" someone cried in a human tongue. "Don't come any closer—stay back—noooooooo!"

The cry was cut short, and a single gunshot echoed across the snowfield. And then—stillness.

"Hey, what's going on?" Crey inquired in a low tone. He didn't know how, but the mountain folk had been wiped out in the blink of an eye—that much was certain. But rather than rejoicing, this was cause for

whispering. How he knew that, he wasn't sure.

"It's coming!" Dust said.

"What is?" asked Vera. Beside her, Lourié too had his eyes peeled.

"The darkness. Look." Crey seemed to understand.

A faint darkness enveloped the group's surroundings. A still-denser darkness was slowly closing on where the mountain folk had been. Whatever lay within it had wiped out the mountain folk. It had dealt with cannibals of unparalleled wickedness in mere seconds. At the very least, it seemed unlikely to pay them a friendly call.

"Doc," Dust called to the woman, keeping his voice low. "Take care of that kid."

Perhaps realizing that the man wasn't talking about defending him, the boy's face went as white as a sheet.

II

"Do you know what it is?" Crey asked, sounding tense for the first time.

"I don't wanna think about it—"

Dust's reply wasn't really an answer at all, but it pointed Vera's mind at the impossible. *It can't be. It just can't.* But it was something that could throw a shadow across the sun, and use the darkness while slaughtering humans. *It can't be.*

"Jump for it, Doc!" Crey shouted.

"Huh?"

"If that's what I think it is, you're better off dead. Plus, Lilia's at the bottom of the ravine. She's a dirty dealer, but she'd probably help you folks, at least."

"Yeah, do it," Dust advised her.

"Okay, but only if you guys do, too."

"I ain't too taken with the idea of splattering in the ravine," Crey replied, his eyes focused straight ahead. "Besides, turning tail without a fight's as good as suicide. That don't sit too well with me. If you're taking anyone with you, make it your bodyguard over there."

"As soon as I'm dead, jump for it." Dust's eyes, too, were trained straight ahead. There was no question he was an excellent bodyguard.

"I can't do that. Dust—I . . ."

"There's no way around it. As far as the business with my daughter, sorry about that—but at any rate, my job here is to keep you safe."

"Five yards off. Hurry up and get going!"

Dust got up. "You're up next!"

"Leave it to me!" Crey thumped his chest. Still, there was something untrustworthy about the man. In the fateful moment when their lives

hung in the balance, there was no telling whether or not he'd come through for them.

The heavens howled. The darkness enveloped Dust.

"Stop!" Vera cried out.

Her cry was coupled with a shout of "Don't go!" from the diminutive figure that dashed from her side—Lourié.

"Mister!" The tone of the boy's voice spoke volumes about a bond that he'd apparently forged with the rough giant of a man during this trip. His tiny form was swallowed by the darkness. Or rather, the boy plunged into it on his own.

At the instant pitch blackness closed him off from the world, Lourié stopped in his tracks. It wasn't due to the cold, nor was it out of fear of the omnipresent black that plastered his field of view. He was paralyzed to the very marrow of his bones by a presence that radiated darkness. And it wasn't so much a *something*—it was *someone*! A short distance from him, he sensed Dust's presence. But there was someone else in the darkness!

So good of you to come.

Those were the words Lourié's ears caught. He couldn't quite tell if it was a voice or the sound of the wind. But he felt certain that the words came from the other presence. Was it a man, a woman, or the wind? That he couldn't say. And yet, he felt quite distinctly that the source of that voice or sound was shrouded in delight.

So good of you to come.

He heard it again.

I've been waiting. Waiting for young blood brimming with life. My child, I shall catch your blood in a golden goblet and drink it dry.

"Who is that?" Lourié finally managed to ask. "Who . . . Who are you? You called me your child—I don't know you!"

My children number in the millions, said the presence. *Now, you shall join their ranks. Consider it an honor.*

"Stop it!" Dust bellowed, but he seemed a million miles away.

"I came up here in search of my father. You—you'd better stay away!"

Suddenly, the presence stood before the boy. He couldn't even speak. Thought itself eluded him. It was as though the daunting mass of a rock wall loomed before him. No interest as to the nature of this being stirred in him. Its very existence was too strange.

Come.

What was that supposed to mean?

A part of Lourié's anatomy suddenly stopped. At the same time, the presence quavered. A slight abnormality had occurred in a star that'd formed over the course of hundreds of millions of years. It had been introduced from the outside.

This time the boy heard it clearly. *Interesting*, the presence

murmured. The voice held clear surprise—and a ring of being deeply touched. *You should see this, too.*

Lourié felt something heavy come to rest on his shoulders. Were they hands? His body turned like it was a sheet of paper.

And Lourié saw. He couldn't tell how far off it was. But he was there. The figure in black had a rifle in one hand and was staring his way in a manner that could only be called quiet. But how beautiful was the face below that traveler's hat! It was the unearthly air that radiated from every inch of him that made it seem so. The snowstorm abated. No fear. Even the wind stopped. Intoxicating. D.

I recognize him as my foe, the voice declared close to the boy's ear. *A foe for which I, Duke Gilzen, would search the entire world.*

The next instant Lourié found himself standing alone, whipped by the wind and snow. A number of voices were calling his name. He felt neither relief nor excitement. The wind struck his cheeks, and snowflakes melted against him. Oddly enough, he didn't even feel the cold.

"Are you all right?"

That was Dust. His rough hand caught the boy's shoulder, shaking him. Both head and body wobbled.

"I'm fine," he replied.

"Are you okay, Lourié?"

That was the doctor, Vera. Her face was right in front of his. She was peering at him intently. Her worried expression changed.

"That's odd." Reaching out one hand, she lifted his eyelid. There was no pain. He didn't even shed a tear. She took his right hand. "His pupils are dilated. And he doesn't have a pulse."

Dust's eyes glinted with curiosity.

Vera put her hand under the boy's nose, waited about three seconds, and then shook her head. As she gazed at Lourié, she wore a look of terrible solitude and loss. She stated plainly, "This child is dead."

"Nonsense!"

Even Crey raced over.

Dust conducted the same tests as the doctor, saying, "I can't believe it, but it's true. The kid . . ." Not surprisingly, he couldn't bring himself to say the rest: . . . *is a corpse*.

"But you can speak, right?"

"Yes," Lourié said with a nod.

"And it seems you can move your body. How about your senses?"

"I'm not cold."

The doctor pinched his cheek. "Does that hurt?"

"No."

"Nothing at all." Vera heaved a sigh. "I really shouldn't be saying this, but what the blazes is going on here?"

"Squirt, can you remember anything?"

Lourié had already prepared himself for that question. "*He* came up to me—and all of a sudden, I just stopped."

"*He?*" Dust furrowed his brow. While he'd been enveloped by the same darkness, apparently he hadn't seen anything.

Lourié closed his eyes. He wasn't tracing back through his memories; he was guarding against the waves of terror bearing down on him.

"Huge like a rocky mountain, and cold as a wall of ice . . ." he mumbled. Both his voice and his body trembled.

After a bit, Vera murmured, "A Noble, then?" It was a solid conclusion.

"Is that what lived up on this mountain?" Crey ran his fingers back through his hair. "You mean the one who ran the whole Frontier back before we had it divvied up like we do now? I heard he was a real demon, so mean other Nobles would look away. As I recall—"

"He was banished for defying the Sacred Ancestor, attacked, and sealed away deep in the earth," Vera continued. "I haven't heard any rumors, but the aircraft that crashed on the mountain . . . Could it be . . ."

They all stopped moving. Horrifying memories gave them the expressions of the dead. They were ultimately revived by the boy.

"But we've got *him* on our side." His voice had such a ring of hope to it; it was easy to forget the wind-whipped snow. "He's a lot bigger than the other guy, and a lot stronger, and much colder—and yet so much warmer, too."

"Who's that?" Crey asked, his features twisted in mock puzzlement.

"Don't play dumb," Dust told the outlaw, grabbing him by the elbow.

"You got me there."

"He saved you, didn't he?" Vera inquired gently.

"That's right." The boy nodded.

"Then he'll probably help you again. I'm sure he must know a way of turning you human again."

The boy knew it, too. No matter what became of the world, there was always hope. He realized that in the darkness.

The wind and snow that lashed them were merciless. Yet a mysterious feeling of goodwill enveloped the four of them. It was almost a sort of warmth.

"Anyway, shouldn't we set up camp or something?" Crey suggested, coming back to reality.

"You're right. We'll freeze out here. And we've got to come up with a plan for getting over that ridge."

"Keep an eye on the kid."

Dust had just walked over to where his gear had been set down when Crey called to him, "Hold up."

What now? Vera's eyes seemed to say as she looked at him accusingly.

"That presence—oh, those guys completely slipped my mind. Damn it!" His narrowed eyes were turned toward the faint gloom over the distant snowfield. Everyone focused their eyes on it.

A hundred yards off, there were indeed shapes moving around.

"The mountain folk." And having said that, Crey gave a sickly groan. Dust had elbowed him in the gut.

"You don't have to spell everything out for us. We know."

Indeed. They all knew the score. Anyone who lived in this world did. But for the briefest of times, the eternal and immutable truth had slipped from their minds: those whom the Nobles fed upon became creatures like the Nobility. Vampires. They were coming. The group that had been devils among men had been transformed into demons of the night.

"That can't be. There might be a shadow over the sun, but it's still daytime!"

Vera's assertion was correct, but the figures in white who forgot all about concealing themselves would make a liar out of her.

III

"Here they come!" Crey grinned.

"You're looking pretty happy about this," said Dust.

"Damn straight. Fakes or not, now that these clowns are like the Nobility, they won't use their ranged weapons and chameleon suits. To show off their immortality, they'll come at us freakin' bare handed! That suits me just fine. Look after the woman and the kid, okay?"

"You're feeling pretty full of yourself."

"Hey, leave this to me."

A slender gleam appeared in Crey's right hand. It was the same Deadman's Blade that even D had wanted to see—would it now demonstrate whether its reputation was deserved?

"But it's daytime—how can they be out in the sunlight?" Vera asked.

"Hold that thought. I'll catch one and ask him for you," Crey replied cheerfully, stepping forward.

Dressed in white, the mountain folk advanced on him as if they were wading through oncoming surf. Weathered by the sun, yet deathly pale, their faces were those of ghosts. Their lips alone were strangely crimson, and the stark incisors that peeked from them were those of the Nobility —the fangs of a vampire. Noble and pseudo-Noble alike suffered from a hunger that would not be sated for all eternity. Having spotted four victims with warm blood in their veins, they had saliva dripping from the corners of their mouths, and their teeth gnashed as they reached out

their hands and dashed toward Crey.

"Mr. Crey!" Lourié cried out to him.

Crey had expected as much. "Relax. Nothing to worry about here!"

"No, I was just going to ask you not to kill too many people."

"You little dope. We're dealing with lackeys of the Nobility. On top of that, they mean to make us like them. It's kill or be killed."

"But—they're human beings."

"They *were* human beings, dummy."

"I don't think it's very nice to go around calling people stupid at the drop of a hat."

Crey had to desperately fight the urge to scream. *I'm about to unleash hell with my knife to protect this squirt?* he thought.

Something whooshed past his cheek. One of his foes' arrows.

"Son of a bitch!"

Bracing himself low, he prepared to jump.

Up ahead of him, the men in white tumbled backward, one after another. They had to be twenty or thirty feet away, at most. Gnarled fingers clawed at the air with eternal curses, and bright blood spilled from mouths vainly opening and closing. The white snow beneath their fallen bodies was swiftly stained crimson. The fact that they were still looking all around was proof that they didn't know their attacker's position. And they were all being taken down.

The four people could only gaze in mute surprise at the arrow vanes jutting from the hearts of the fallen. They had an ally with a bow in the area. And said ally was absolutely deadly with it! Nearly ten foes had been eliminated in as many seconds, and each had been pierced through the heart with a single shot. That didn't seem the sort of thing any ordinary—or respectable—human could do. After all, the snowstorm still raged.

The second the mountain folk had begun to fall, Crey had shouted, "Hit the deck!" and lain flat on the ground. Though he wasn't the kind of man to flinch from any foe, he had no way of knowing how accurate the mysterious shooter was.

"Where are they?" Crey inquired, though even he didn't know whom he expected to answer.

"Dad?" Lourié cried out. As if he had been struck dumb for precisely this reason, the boy got up and looked all around, unable to contain his explosion of emotion. "Dad! Is that you, Dad?"

Before the kid could start jumping about, the guardsman pushed him back to the ground, and he too looked all around as he said, "Did you say it was your dad?" Dust's narrow eyes went wide.

"Are you sure, Lourié?" Vera asked as she crawled closer. "I haven't heard much about your father—was he a huntsman?"

"That's right. It must be him. My father saved us."

The boy was trying to get up again as if he'd lost his mind, but Dust

kept one hand on him to hold him down.

"Simmer down. Does your dad have the kind of skill we saw just now?"

"He does."

"Calm down," Dust said, putting strength behind his arm. Lourié's body stiffened, and the pain cleared his head. "That's not the work of a mortal man. Is your dad some kind of monster?"

"No." Lourié had taken a few seconds to reply.

"Then something other than a human must've saved us. You know why?" Moving only his head, Dust looked at the doctor and the outlaw. Both shook their heads. Dust said to the boy, "I don't know, either. And so it might be that the shooter wasn't necessarily out to help us."

"What then?"

At the boy's nervous query, Dust gave him a friendly slap on one feeble shoulder. "Maybe they wanted to keep all the food for themselves."

"I agree," Crey said, raising his right hand like a schoolboy, while Vera gave him a scathing look.

"It's too soon to say for sure. Perhaps they have some reason for not wanting us to see them."

Crey snorted derisively. "So, we've got ourselves a bashful little ally? If there were anyone like that around, we'd have long since caught wind of it. First off, how would they even survive up here on the mountain?"

"The mountain folk get by," said Vera.

"Those clowns aren't even human anymore. Snow hares and snow panthers I could see, but they eat bewilderers and beast shrooms, making 'em half monster themselves! And they eat human flesh, too. Human flesh!"

"Oh, stop it!" the doctor scolded him, no longer able to restrain herself, and the outlaw actually buttoned his lip. "Have they gone?"

Telling the boy to stay put, Dust got to his feet. Crey was still lying flat against the ground.

"That was close. Do you suppose they ran off?"

"Whoever it was killed off all the white suits. Would've known where we were from the very start. If they'd wanted to, they'd have punched every one of our tickets."

"Good point," Vera conceded, grabbing the nearby Crey by the elbow.

"What do you want?"

"Get on your feet already. A man's supposed to look out for women and children, isn't he?"

"For your information, I'm an outlaw," Crey said, baring his teeth. "My main gig is bodyguarding, but I do some killing on the side. I've got thirty counts against me, and I'm proud of it. If they ever catch me, I'm looking at the death penalty a dozen times, minimum. A person in my

line doesn't look out for women and children."

"Nothing on this mountain has anything to do with your *line*. There are just men, women, and children up here. And if you're a man, you can't just leave the weak to fend for themselves, can you?"

"I don't wanna hear *weak* this and *weak* that out of you. If there's one thing I hate, it's skirts like you who're all high and mighty when it suits you, then turn around and play the weak-little-female card."

"That's a woman's prerogative. Stop your complaining."

"At any rate, we're safe now. Let's set up the tents."

Dust's words spelled the end of their quarrel.

The snow blew wildly into their faces. Now that the living dead had been picked off, a new specter of death had come to spread its wings.

The refuge hadn't proved of any use. Although Lilia had hit the switch as soon as she jumped, the refuge had been assailed by a ferocious cross breeze that tore it from her grasp. On top of that, though she'd landed feet first in a heavy covering of snow, her right foot had been sprained by the rocks below, and it didn't look like she'd be able to stand anytime soon. Even here at the bottom of the ravine, the wind and snow blew just as hard. Lilia wasn't rattled. Her winter coat was still in good shape, and though the refuge had eluded her, once she tracked it down, she'd have sufficient food and medicine. She'd even be able to perform a simple medical procedure.

"Guess I'll see how well I handle the cold until I get this foot fixed."

She looked up. The sky was already tinged with darkness, allowing her to make out nothing save the whiteness of snow. Suddenly a chill ran down her spine. Not fear, but a physical phenomenon that was enough to invite it. She was cold.

Her eyes raced to the control panel on the left breast of her coat. The temperature read zero. She couldn't be sure, but she thought the shock of the fall had probably caused the device to malfunction.

Lilia looked up at the sky again and clucked her tongue. "Mark my words, I'll be relaxing with a long, hot shower before this is over."

Now the refuge was her only hope. Taking the longsword from her back to support her weight, she barely managed to get up on her left leg. Even advancing a single step sent acute pain shooting through her right foot. Apparently she'd broken bones in her ankle and knee. Still, Lilia had to grin.

"That'll clear away the cobwebs!"

In the snow, her body heat would soon be drained and sleepiness would beset her. When that happened, pain would undoubtedly be the

best way to keep herself awake.

But things didn't go at all as planned. Search as she might, she was unable to locate the refuge. Lilia, covered in white, spent an hour in her fruitless quest, and now she collapsed in the snow.

"Not done yet!"

At this rate, there was no advantage in her having abandoned the rest of the group. Every time she moved her right foot a dull pain spread through her, making it hard to get around. Her consciousness suddenly started slipping away. Quickly raising the sword she was using as a cane, she drew the blade from its sheath and set it down to her right. She took a backhanded hold of the hilt with her right hand. Then, rolling up her left sleeve, she bit into her bicep. About ten seconds later, she felt something warm spreading through her mouth, which had been frozen.

Lilia sucked down her own rapidly cooling blood. The blood that poured out without end seemed hot. While she was focused solely on drinking, something moved down by her feet. Her eyes shifted to catch it. It was the still-compacted refuge. Before she could feel joy at this, Lilia was chilled in another sense. There was someone just beyond the refuge. Someone whose very presence could keep even a Huntress honed by countless battles from moving a muscle.

"That must be delicious. What could be better than your own blood?" The low, solemn voice seemed to ricochet off the snow and the wind.

Yeah, it's really good, Lilia replied in her mind, pinning all her hopes on her right hand. Taking the blade she'd set down to her right, she made a backhanded slash. It mowed right through her opponent's torso. But the movement stopped at his waist. Although it came to rest softly, the blade wouldn't move, as if it were embedded in a rock wall. A rock wall that seemed to boast an infinite mass.

"You nicked my finger a little," the voice said.

It took some time for her to comprehend what that meant. "You stopped my sword—with your fingers?"

"Quite impressive talent you have. As child's play goes, that is," the voice continued. Disturbingly, it didn't seem to be mocking her. It continued, "That settles it!"

Before Lilia could even frame the question *Settles what?* a black figure filled her entire field of view.

How the Demon Castle Came to Be

chapter 6

I

Looks like it's over, more or less. They're putting the tents up now. With two fellas there, they should be fine. One of 'em is wounded, though."

The hoarse voice was slammed by the gusting snow. Lowering the left hand he'd held out toward the rocky ridge, D turned in a different direction, looking down at the sarcophagus at his feet. He was inside the aircraft, and the ceiling and side of the fuselage had been torn apart. A chain lay coiled like a snake, and a thick lid that looked to weigh about a ton had been knocked casually to the floor.

"Well, that Duke Gilzen sure is one hell of a Nobleman. More than ten thousand years trapped in this coffin, buried under rocks and dirt, and there isn't even the smallest trace of malice or indignation. He must've been too busy to hold onto such things. Heh heh, a little break—some Relaxation Time, eh?"

A great many murals and ancient writings documented examples of Nobles who'd closed themselves away in coffins to escape from the world. *Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.* As if infatuated with these words, many Nobles bid adieu to the moonlight and masquerades, then sealed themselves away in the earth. Though the reason was unknown, in two places writings were discovered that described a weariness with the material world. This is where the concept of Relaxation Time originated. Later excavation discovered that most of those who'd abandoned this world had never returned to the surface again, having taken their only way out of eternal life under the cold, dark soil. All that remained in the bottom of the coffin was opulent clothing and accessories, a pile of dust—and a bloodstained stake of ash. What had they reflected on in their coffins, and what had they felt?

Of course, Duke Gilzen hadn't returned to the soil of his own accord. His hatred and frustration could well be imagined. And yet the hoarse voice said there were none.

"Hate distilled to its purest form," D said softly. "After shattering the bounds of comprehension, it becomes a void and no trace of it can be detected. But that void takes the impurities from any and every emotion."

"Do you know anyone whose body burns with pure hatred?"

Nothing from the Hunter.

"It would probably literally burn out your body. Does Gilzen still have a human form or not? Hell, the mountain folk he bit came back to life in broad daylight. D, there's no record of Gilzen having that ability. Maddened by hate in his coffin, he must've developed that power. If left unchecked, the vampires he creates could rise from their graves in daylight and set off like an army in search of human lifeblood. Who could stop demons of darkness unfazed by the sun?"

The voice stopped there for a moment. It had to calm itself from its agitated state. Soon it continued, "Not you. You don't measure up to Gilzen yet. The only thing in our favor is that your power increases day by day, but still you're only a match for what he was ten thousand years ago. You can't compare to what he is now. You can't fight him!"

"My job is to rescue survivors, locate the cargo they carried—and dispose of its contents."

"And that's why I'm telling you *not right now*. You'll get your chance, guaranteed. You just have to bide your time."

"His castle was on this mountain. The aircraft crash-landed here. That's no coincidence. A tremendous will is working toward Gilzen's revival. If he gets into his castle, it'll be the end of the world."

"A land of endless night, you mean? But . . ."

"I'm going."

Before he'd even spoken, D was in motion. The instant he stepped from the fuselage, gusting snow enveloped him, but since the aircraft itself was riddled with holes it wasn't much of a change.

"Where are we headed?"

"To search for his castle. It should be up there."

"What about the others? Oh, that's right, you said they'd be better off not going. Took all that into consideration when you left them behind, didn't you? But I didn't think Gilzen would come into this."

As if to say all that would depend on their fate, D headed forward without even a glance back at the rocky ridge. The rock shelf snaked along the mountainside.

"Looks like the poor crew was out of luck," the hoarse voice said. Its tone wasn't exactly maudlin. Luck was luck—nothing to get emotional about there. "There were some bloodstains, but nothing that they couldn't survive. No doubt Gilzen carried 'em off when he got out of his coffin. With some repairs, the bird might fly again. They weren't quite as lucky as it was."

After following the line of the mountain for fifty yards from the aircraft, D halted. The rock shelf abruptly ended there. His beautiful, if not glowing, visage looked up at a rockface that was nearly vertical. Though enough to daunt the average person or even a professional climber, the mountainside didn't seem a serious obstacle to this young man. The only reason he looked up was to determine the most direct

route for his ascent, and less than five seconds later D was reaching for a protrusion from the rockface with one hand. Gliding up the wall of rock like a heavenly reptile, the figure seemed to take the blustering wind and snow like a lovely serenade to his beauty.

"He comes, the one from earlier," a wrinkled, withered old voice said. Though the voice seemed to be that of an old man, the face and form that rose from the faint gloom were those of a crone. Dressed in what appeared to be dozens of layers of cloth, each stitched together from multicolored scraps, she resembled the sort of vagabond women that could often be found in Frontier villages. But she didn't have a vagabond's eyes. Or a vagabond's nose. Or even a vagabond's mouth. All of these features she lacked. The face crowned with hair that frizzed out like broken springs had nothing save a single blood-red eyeball set in the middle of it.

"What do you make of this?" a different voice inquired.

Darkness loomed by the crone's side. And not in the sense of a person merely dressed in black. The square room was split down the middle, with the old woman in the light half and the other half filled with darkness. Where the crone was, white held sway. Here and there were glimpses of a lustrous sheen in what seemed to be an unusually cramped room, but then behind the crone it seemed to go on forever—spreading to the very ends of the earth, as it were—and before long the lustrous things that'd seemed to prove how tight the quarters were had changed their positions, so that the space bounding the old woman looked to be infinite. Where was this place? And who was it that lurked in the darkness?

"He is a fearsome opponent," the crone replied. Her gray complexion turned paler still. "At present, his highness the duke is stronger, but even this old woman can't say if such will be the case tomorrow."

"Do you mean to say he might become something greater than me?"

There was no reply.

"Before being interred in the cold, dark earth, I heard something. A success had been born to *him*, they said. I think this one can be none other than that success. The shot that one got off—that worthless piece of lead shook me with bone-breaking force." The voice halted. When it rang out again, it held an unexpected feeling— remorse. "I'm afraid I must ask you to die again after all, Sunya."

"As you wish," the crone replied joyously, bowing. Tears glistened in her eye. "Ten thousand years ago I lost this life along with you, milord, but I was raised sooner than any other. That is enough to satisfy this old

woman. To perish once more is nothing to me."

"I'm sorry."

"Why should you apologize to the likes of me? Tell that to every last living thing as they all meet their ends by your hand. That, an eternal curse on an entire planet, should be sung of you, and you shall be showered with praise from the hereafter."

Her voice rose and dipped, a paean of interchanging gentleness and fervor.

The crone didn't wait for the nothingness that would follow. From garments that resembled an accumulation of resplendent trash there appeared an arm like a withered tree. In her fist she gripped a slender dagger. Her other hand appeared, joining the first, and the crone used them to plunge the dagger into her own heart. A second later her body exploded into a hundred billion drops of blood. The fog of blood eddied.

At that point an arm appeared from the depths of the darkness. Sheathed in a long glove, it was stained with blood up to its black sleeve, but it held what looked for all the world like a single stone key. Extending the key into empty space, it was instantly shrouded in vermilion gauze.

"A baptism of blood, so that the castle may be restored."

The words came in the voice of the crone.

As if in response, from somewhere that could've been either quite distant or very close, there resounded a strident clank of hard objects meshing together.

II

A bit of the twilight yet remained.

The villagers of Mungs couldn't get through the day without drink, and with the strange group that'd called on the village the previous night as their grist they were taking their cups in the one privately owned barroom and the hotel bar when shouts unexpectedly rang out. As if chased by monsters, everyone in both places raced out into the street, where a girl stood, pointing and murmuring like a lunatic. "The castle . . . There's a light in a window of the castle . . ."

Following the fingertip that trembled with surpassing terror, what should the villagers see—

“What’s that sound?” Standing before a half-pitched tent, Vera pricked up her ears. Vibrations seemed to be rising beneath her feet—a rumbling in the earth.

“There’s going to be an avalanche! D and the aircraft are in danger.”

Before Crey had finished shouting, everyone turned their eyes to the peak soaring behind the ridge.

“What’s that?” Lourié murmured in dumbfounded surprise.

“The mountain’s changing!”

An intense jolt hit D’s body. It was so fierce it seemed it would shake the flesh from his bones, but it didn’t stop the Hunter. Chunks of rock came free, striking D’s shoulder and hat as they fell. More than a couple of times the protrusion he was clinging to broke off. Each time, his feet halted his fall.

After a drop of over fifty yards, his left hand squeaked, “You lucky bastard. Just once I’d like to see what’d happen to you if you fell a thousand yards and slammed into the ground.”

Before long, D reached the summit. An ordinary pinnacle of rock challenged the sky. That was all there was.

“Forget the castle; there ain’t signs of so much as a tent up here.”

D turned the palm of his grumbling hand downward.

“Huh?” A little cry of surprise rang out.

What D had seen had vanished without a trace. The rock shelf now jutted out much farther, forming a gigantic crucible of boiling lava that was spreading in all directions.

“So, rock gives birth to rock?”

The hoarse voice’s muttering stopped when it saw objects rising from the lava. Muddy walls and iron beams swiftly took shape, fitting together to form chambers large and small. All were cast from the red molten rock—or rather, from the iron it contained. Both the pipes that dripped hot slag as they carried molten metal and the colossal ladles that scooped the necessary amount of iron from the crucible for other forms of transport caught the breeze of cooling fans formed from melted iron, swiftly cooling and taking final shape.

“This is an incredible system. Looks like he intends to build his home from scratch, starting with the smelting of the raw materials!”

Before the voice had finished speaking, the rock that loomed before D split. Though D covered himself with the hem of his coat, he was still

blown back thirty feet, and as he flew, he saw the flaming iron beams tower higher, the cords wrap together, the tubes fit one into another, and the parabolic antenna of an interstellar communication system take shape.

"All of this must be powered by anti-energy. How will he make an antiproton reactor? Molding all the circuits, getting and refining the raw materials—what a pain in the ass!"

The hoarse voice, sounding almost casual, streamed into the air. D, without anything to grab hold of, was going straight down—falling toward the world of molten metal below, where the work continued.

"So, what are you gonna do?"

"If I burn up, can you bring me back?"

"Hmm. That'd probably be worth a shot. In the past, there was a Noble who fell into the mouth of a volcano, but then, you're not quite like him."

"What became of that Nobleman?"

"He didn't return to normal."

Heat buffeted D's face. He was less than five seconds from a swirling morass of fiery steel heated to tens of thousands of degrees.

Three seconds.

Two seconds.

One.

"Did you see that just now?" shouted a man peering through a telescope in the village lookout tower.

The villager next to him didn't even have time to finish asking, "See what?"

"There's a rock shelf around the fifteen-hundred-yard point. It's turning into a castle up there. I saw a person fall down into it. But just as they were about to go splat, they sprouted wings!"

"You're out of your mind!" the man beside him spat condescendingly, but the man with the telescope just leaned forward, using his free hand to wipe the perspiration from his brow. It was cold sweat.

"It was just like they turned into this huge, pitch-black bat or something. When I was a tyke, I heard about that from my granny time and again. Real Nobles can turn into bats, she used to say. *That* was a genuine Noble."

The Hunter made a soundless landing on top of a partitioning wall. Bluish smoke began to rise from the soles of his boots. The wall was still burning.

One of the hundreds of enormous, red-hot cranes carried a burning iron plate. Leaping without a sound, D landed on top of it. A black shadow loomed over his head, and then the snowstorm stopped. The ceiling had been completed. It covered an area that was clearly even vaster than what D had looked down upon. Already several hundred floors' worth of corridors had begun snaking out in all directions.

When an iron beam made contact with a nearby floor, D jumped for it. He'd just barely make it—the jump was about fifty yards. There was even a handrail. His left hand reached out. But not far enough.

His right hand flashed into action. Striking in the same motion, the blade bit into the handrail. All D had to do was put some strength into his right arm, and he was over the rail. The spot where his sword and the handrail met was tinged with crimson.

"A beam cannon?"

Even before the hoarse voice asked that question, the figure in black tilted deeply, dropping down once again like a bird of unearthly beauty —falling this time into a bottomless abyss. Again, the hem of his coat flared out. He dropped quickly, like a stone—and landed like the snow, seemingly without weight or sound.

White smoke and flames spouted from the chest of D's coat. During the fall, he'd been blasted with lasers. Crimson flashes streamed in front of D and behind him, to his right and to his left. Walls and pipes were vaporized, reduced to ions and nothingness.

D was standing on a passageway that jutted from a stone wall. The Nobility preferred classical materials and architecture to ultramodern styling.

"Hurry up. Once you're inside—"

D had broken into a dash before he even heard the hoarse voice. Running fifty yards in less than two seconds, he charged through a black entranceway. One shake of his body was enough to extinguish the flames that burned on his back and waist. The laser blasts had been ferocious. His dash had put out most of the flames, and the shake took care of the last remnants.

"You were shot in fourteen places. Forget humans; even a major Nobleman would need four or five days of complete bed rest after that, on account of how the cells get burned right out. I'm surprised you could still run."

It was unclear what D made of that voice as his feet pounded down the stone pathway, racing around a seventh corner before halting. Unlike the path he was on, the stone walls ahead were undulating.

"From here on, it's incomplete," said D. "Give me an analogical inference of this castle's layout."

A moment later, the hoarse voice replied, "You're a regular slave driver. If I do that, my brain will be fried for two or three days!"

"If your head needs cooling off, I can do it anytime."

There was another silence. And then, the voice said, "*Oooooh*. Did you just tell a joke? Well, I can die now without any regrets!"

Squeezing his left hand tight once to choke out the disagreeable voice, D turned down a corridor where the walls rippled like waves.

By "analogical inference," he meant that he wanted his left hand to come to a precise conclusion from insufficient data and commit it to memory. Because this overtaxed part of the brain, reaching an incorrect conclusion could leave a person broken and useless. Once the castle was complete, data relating to it would have to be taken from the master computer, but the defensive systems surrounding it would undoubtedly be fully operational. The quickest way to get that data would be to read it from an as-yet-uncompleted area, like drawing a blood sample from a vein, so to speak. And it was necessary to do so before its defensive armaments were fully installed.

Bending down in the rippling corridor, D extended his left hand toward the floor. Five seconds passed—then ten.

"Good enough!" The words escaped weakly from his left hand.

D stood up.

"My head's burning . . . Can't take anymore . . ."

The Hunter said to his groaning left hand, "Do you know what room Gilzen would occupy?" His voice was cold, showing not the slightest concern for anyone else's circumstances.

"More or . . . less . . ."

"I need that, and the central control room. First, to the former."

D turned around.

Countless figures were barreling around the corner.

"So, has the castle's security finally risen again?" the left hand murmured unconcernedly.

At the fore were a number of guards in rough armor who carried rifles. Purple streaks of light stretched from them. Particle beams. Though the beams flew straight, you could hardly say the shooters' aim was true.

D charged like a black cyclone through the enemy fire. Naked steel flashed out. And helmeted heads sailed through the air. It was a horribly comical tableau.

With the first four slain, the rest of the men backed away amid much chatter. The words that reached D's ears were strange.

"Oh, how odd. That's the language of the ancient Crystal Palace. Now, this is a Noble who's on par with the Sacred Ancestor."

What the hoarse voice was driving at was this: the Sacred Ancestor—holding by far the highest position in the ancient Noble society—and the Elders that were the next rank had relaxed in a city of darkness, stillness, and ice at the world's northern extreme while laying plans to rule the earth. These people had conversed in a special language unknown not only to humans, but to all save those who dwelled in the Crystal Palace. This was the language of the Crystal Palace, at times taken as the word of God bestowing praise and prosperity, and at other times abhorred as the devil's edicts commanding ruin and death. It was also said that the retainers of the chosen ones who gathered at the Crystal Palace spoke a rudimentary version of that tongue.

"Don't kill 'em all. Leave one alive so we can ask where Gilzen—"

As he listened to the hoarse voice, D headed back down the corridor he'd just taken. Spears assailed him from three directions. The men who held them wore smiles of delight on their lips.

D displayed ungodly speed in his movements. Split-second timing allowed him to slip between two spears aimed at his chest and abdomen, while a third stopped in the grip of his left hand, with the Hunter sliding up the weapon's shaft as his right hand reached over his shoulder. Though he was poised to slash in a diagonal fashion, his blade limned a horizontal semicircle that mowed through the torsos of the men. Their upper halves tumbled off in whichever direction the impetus of each dictated, scattering fresh blood and entrails as they rolled across the floor.

Still retaining his grip on the spear with his left hand, D hurled it forward. Three of the men who were lined up farther down the corridor were impaled on it.

They came at the Hunter from behind, blades drawn. A heartbeat later, one reeled back, split open from head to chest, while a second and third swung their deadly weapons. D didn't move from his spot, and the blades appeared to sink into him. However, as the men reeled backward with a bloody gale a second later, D was already dashing back down the corridor in the direction he'd originally been headed.

Incomprehensible words mixed with the sound of footfalls, and four more men were slain by the Hunter's deadly blade. Undoubtedly instructions had been given to surround him and cut him down. It was a wide corridor. Ten or so of them came at D from either side, encircling

him. But try as they might to close their ring on him, they couldn't, with D remaining out of reach of their swords while his blade ruthlessly and flawlessly made death the fate of each of them. He seemed to be in a critical location.

Like the wind, D blew through a number of gates. Though lasers pierced him all over, his opponents fell victim to D's sword and his rough wooden needles before they could drop the Hunter. D made no attempt to discover the means of opening and closing the gates, which were actually opened by a special key. Instead, D placed his left hand against the keyhole. Each opened in less than two seconds.

"Just one more to go!" the hoarse voice exclaimed.

The seventh gate opened.

D halted. Just fifty yards ahead of him loomed the eighth gate, and before it were arrayed more than thirty figures. The men stood with laser rifles and traditional firearms at the ready, safeties off. From the ceiling behind them, an unknown manner of weapon was drawing a bead on D's heart.

"Hold it right there," said a voice accented by the ancient Crystal Palace's tongue, and the whole group froze.

From the source of that command the ranks of men parted, and a figure in an aqua cape stepped to the fore.

"Even given that our defensive formations were ill executed, you did well to make it this far," said a pale man every bit as tall as D. His physique was gaunt, and he had a supernatural air about him that would make those who saw him want to look away. His voice was strangely high.

"Where is Gilzen?" D inquired. There was nothing else for him to ask.

"The master is outside. He's enjoying the construction of his manse."

Come to mention it, from somewhere beyond the ceiling came the sound of pounding iron and the spray of sparks from fusing metal. Though the construction methods were terribly outdated, the results were daunting to behold, with pipes dozens of yards in diameter fusing together in under a second before being joined to another and another. It was a sight D alone could see through the darkness.

"I am Valen, a member of Duke Gilzen's Sacred Protector Knights. You shall not pass." To the others he said, "The rest of you aren't to lay a hand on him."

As soon as the men bowed in unison, D leapt into the air. His blade was over Valen's head. If he were to swing it home as he landed, it would effortlessly rip through his opponent—who stood stock still, seemingly paralyzed—as if he were water.

D was struck by a sharp cramp. On landing, his form remained a thing of peerless beauty, but his sword slashed empty air.

From a spot a few yards away, Valen smiled thinly. His voice had

been rather feminine to start with, and his laughter was as well. “So, you won’t dodge but you’ll parry? No one ever scored two critical hits on me before, but there won’t be a third!”

However, with that, Valen froze. Exactly two seconds later he expelled a deep breath and wiped away the sweat that’d suddenly erupted on his brow. “Such an unearthly aura . . . Aside from the master, I’ve never felt the like . . . This makes it well worth returning to life.”

D raised his blade from where his downward stroke had left it. Its tip halted directly in line with Valen’s gaze. Valen’s eyes seemed to drink the glint from the steel. Or perhaps they were focused on D’s gorgeous visage behind it. With a cry, he tumbled backward. From between the fingers clamped to his right eye there jutted a stark wooden needle. D’s left arm had made the throw.

And then the Hunter leapt up over Valen—and the sword blade came down on the top of his head. Standing in front of the vermilion-stained knight who toppled backward, D braced himself for his next attack as he turned and looked around.

“Not much of a challenge,” the hoarse voice informed him. “Gilzen is outside. Let’s go look for him.”

Making no reply, D approached the gate. He pressed his left hand against it. This time it took nearly five seconds for it to open. As soon as the gate opened, a weird presence could be sensed near the last gate he’d passed through. A rough wooden needle flew from D’s left hand. A diminutive figure dressed from head to foot in a crimson robe took cover in the darkness a second later, vanishing from sight.

Suddenly, the darkness sprang into motion. D’s sword flashed out. Falling to his feet without a sound was the rough wooden needle, now in two pieces. Had the one lurking in the depths of the darkness hurled it back? Had they caught D’s needle first?

The gate behind him opened. D backed through it. A narrow space swallowed him, and the gate shut. It was an elevator. The Hunter’s left hand pressed against the inner wall, and the elevator quickly began its descent.

“Hurry up. If this thing stops along the way, we’re in trouble!” the hoarse voice from his hand told him. “Three thousand stories belowground—this is one hell of a setup, eh?”

A green line above the door was rapidly dwindling. It was a series of flickering digits.

“A thousand stories belowground. Eleven hundred and six—eleven fifty-eight.”

The sensation of controlled falling came to a dead stop.

“This isn’t good. Now we’re stuck. We’re hanging in midair.”

By the time the hoarse voice was done grumbling, D had already begun to take action. He reached his left hand into his coat. When it

came out again, a black sphere rested in its palm.

"Is that one of the mountain folks' grenades? I'm surprised the lasers didn't hit it. Stingy little packrats will inherit the earth."

D's form flew up, then back down again. He'd stuck the grenade to the center of the ceiling. A slim wooden needle jutted from the ceiling at an angle and ran through the grenade. The faint sound of its fuse could be heard.

"You've already *activated* it? Being a packrat wasn't enough—you had to be impulsive to boot?"

The voice sounded almost despairing, but the span of a single breath later, the ceiling was removed by a loud and fiery blast. This was the kind of archaic device the Nobility favored—and with the cables blown free along with the ceiling, like the proverbial stone the elevator dropped two thousand floors, with D still onboard.

I

Although the group hadn't gotten caught up in an avalanche, the snowstorm picked up with the coming of twilight and began to trouble them. They dug a hollow in the snow and planned to use their coats as sleeping bags to keep warm. Vera's medicine would also prevent Dust's wound from getting infected. That left as their only problems the fear of the darkness and the castle.

The snow-covered peak of Mount Shilla had suddenly transformed into an enormous castle. The ridge had collapsed, leaving the four of them utterly stranded. They had to wonder if the mountain folk who'd been turned into vampires might not somehow return to life yet again to assail them with fangs bared. Worst of all, they didn't know what had raised them from the dead, where the culprit was, or what they had planned. Even if whoever it was had returned to the castle, they would be watching them even now with the bloodshot eyes of the Nobility and lips crazed by eternal hunger.

Two tents had been erected. Vera and Dust went into one, while Crey and Lourié occupied the other. Initially the plan was to have Vera and Lourié in one and the two men in the other, but not knowing what might be prowling around out there, it was decided to have one man in each tent.

When their meal of crackers and canned goods was finished, Lourié—who hadn't said a word up to that point—was looking out the window when he started talking.

"Say, you think that lady's okay?"

He was referring to Lilia.

Rolling over, Crey was incredulous.

"You're worried about that sorry-ass woman? She treated you like crap, and left us in the cold! Normally, that's the kind of thing you could hold against her to your dying day."

Nothing from the boy. Lourié was silent not because he agreed with the outlaw, but because he'd noticed the malice that permeated the man's words. Nevertheless, he ventured, "But what if, somehow, she ended up in the castle and . . ." He couldn't bring himself to finish.

Crey chortled. "Then so much the better. Hell, right about now the master of the castle's draining her blood."

Then the boy changed the topic. “I’m worried about the two next door.”

Crey gave the boy a stunned look. “Why’s that? They’re a guard and a doctor!”

“I’m worried about them. The doctor seems to think she’s done something wrong to Mr. Dust, and he’s so cold to her.”

“You’re gonna grow up to be a nosy old man. I agree with you, though.”

The boy then turned back to Crey and asked, “Why do you suppose that is?” He was talking about Vera and Dust.

“Damned if I know. Something must’ve happened.” Crey looked up at the ceiling. “Frontier or Capital—wherever you go, so long as there’s people there, you’ll find kinds of trouble you’d never imagine. Then throw the Nobility into the mix, and you’ve got a real mess. What really makes things dangerous is the Nobles seem to have emotions like hate and sadness and love, too.”

“They both look so sad.”

“Really? It don’t look that way to me.”

“I think it’s in their hearts.”

“You really are like a nosy old landlord, aren’t you? I’m sure that’ll serve you really well!”

“Mr. Crey, why are you up on the mountain?”

The guileless eyes upon him flustered the outlaw.

“Don’t go turning your guns on me all of a sudden.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“I know. I don’t exactly look like the mountain-climbing type. You’d expect to see me shaking folks down at knifepoint at best, eh?”

“That’s not what I—” Lourié began angrily. He shook his head ferociously in denial.

Crey grinned wryly. “Oh, that’s okay. Let me take this opportunity to put my cards on the table. You get to be about your age, that makes you an adult out on the Frontier. You should make it a point to find out a little about the man sleeping in the next bed. I’m Crey Jansen, just so you know. Knife expert and outlaw. The first time I killed anyone, I was seven.”

Lourié gazed, dumbfounded, at the willing confessor.

“It was the landlord of our apartment, who was pawing at my mother. That was some pretty smooth knife handling, if I do say so myself. Even at that age, I was already a full-blown punk!”

“Please don’t bring out your knife.”

Seeing how the boy’s terrified eyes focused on the knife that flew from his sleeve, Crey smiled at the boy and said, “No need to be as scared as all that. Hell, a knife is just a tool. The same as a hoe or a plow.”

“I don’t think so. A knife like that can’t be used for anything but

stabbing people. And the person who carries it—" Here the boy hastily clamped a hand over his mouth.

"C'mon, can't you come right out and say it?"

"Say what?"

"You're a crafty little squirt, ain't you." Giving another one of his countless bitter grins, Crey twirled the knife intently. "Sure, the kind of fella who carries a couple of these around ain't gonna amount to much. By the time I realized that, it was already too late. Yeah, I'd killed fifteen, maybe sixteen by then. I was, what, maybe eighteen years old?"

"Are you sure you don't think of those as 'the good old days' ?"

"Shut your yap."

"So, why go up Mount Shilla?"

The boy then buttoned his lip. He'd noticed a shadow skim across Crey's profile. Though Lourié wasn't yet fully grown, even he could understand it was a wound that would never heal. It was enough to give him the impression the outlaw had a very good reason for climbing the mountain.

"That's enough about little ol' me. Getting back to you—you were up here searching for your dad, weren't you?"

"That's right. Even now, my father lives somewhere on the mountain. I'm sure it was my father who took care of those mountain folk."

"Well, that's just great. But, if your dad's still alive, wouldn't he be better off coming down the mountain instead of wiping out mountain folk? I mean, that's only human. Or is there some special reason why he wouldn't wanna come back? Your mom wasn't some kind of mad nymphomaniac or something, was she?"

"Please, stop it!"

Crey shrugged his shoulders and laughed sheepishly. "Sorry for saying that. Forgive me?" Seeing the tears filling the boy's eyes and the way his body quivered, the outlaw pointed the knife in his hand in Lourié's direction. "To show you how bad I feel, I'll save you just once if you get into trouble. Even if it kills me. Then that'll put us square, okay?"

Wiping the corners of his eyes, Lourié replied, "That's all right. Don't worry yourself about it. I'm used to people saying all sorts of things to me." And saying that, he got into his sleeping bag. "I'm going to bed now. Good night."

The sound of the wind howled fiercely in Crey's ears.

When they found Crey at their tent a few minutes later, Vera and Dust were startled.

"What is it?"

"Well, I just wanted to hear a female voice. Say, Gramps, go keep an eye on the squirt."

"Gramps" glowered at the outlaw. For a moment his look was savage enough to drain the color from the hired killer. But the guard quickly turned to face Vera.

"It's okay. Go on."

Once Dust had left, Crey asked right away, "About the squirt: you happen to know anything about his family?"

Vera was stunned. "What are you trying to hide? It's hard to picture you being concerned about that child."

"I ain't really concerned about him. The squirt's got nothing to do with me. It's just that, in my experience, when a kid like that pulls a stunt you'd never imagine, there's usually a heap of money involved. No way in hell would a kid that age be climbing a mountain in winter—I don't care how much he loves his dad. What I wanna know ties into that."

"I figured it was something like that—or I wish I could say I did." The doctor's gaze seemed to see right into his soul, and Crey averted his eyes. "So you really want to know about the child's family situation because of money?"

"Why else?"

"Very well, then. I pretended not to know around the boy, but his father went up to check out the Noble's castle."

"What, he was a scholar or something?"

Vera shook her head wearily. "Paintings and jewels, weapons and machines the likes of which the Nobility alone could produce but humans could use—haven't you ever heard how Nobles were able to make gold from seawater?"

"So that's what he was there for, to loot the joint?"

Knitting her brow, Vera shushed him. Drawing a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the chest pocket of her thermal coat, she took one for herself, then offered the pack to Crey.

"I feel like I'm in one of those classy 'liquor salons' in the Capital."

"Do they have hostesses my age there?"

Sparking the strike-anywhere match on the sleeve of her coat, she lit her own cigarette and Crey's.

Blowing out a lungful of smoke, the outlaw said, "That tastes foul. What'd they do, roll up dried mildew or something?"

"Live with it. Out on the Frontier, this is what you get."

That life on the Frontier was no easy thing had surpassed fact and become the stuff of legends. To wit: Without shipments from the Capital, they would starve in three days. In this constant state of starvation,

parents would kill and eat their children. When there was nothing left to eat, they would drink their own blood. In doing so, they would become half vampire themselves despite never having been bitten by a Noble. And so on, and so forth . . . The truth was, most areas were capable of self-sufficiency, and items that supposedly could be acquired only in the Capital were frequently brought out by black-marketers and moved at exorbitant prices. Depending on the territory, there were places that had entered contracts with mail-order firms in the Capital and squeezed out the black-marketers. Still, luxury goods remained in short supply.

"Well, I bitched about it too for the first six months I was on the Frontier. Out with a bunch of bumpkins like that, you weren't likely to find someone looking to hire a killer. Hardly a surprise someone would turn sneak thief and go after a Noble's treasure."

"There were rumors for a long time that the child's father was collecting items that belonged to the Nobility and selling them to black-marketers. I think the boy knows it, too. When I served as the school's doctor, it was the cause of a big fight that ended up with students carried into my office."

"Oh, the poor little fella."

Blowing out smoke, Vera replied, "Wrong. It was the children he fought you should feel sorry for."

"Really?"

"Three upperclassmen. All boys who stood a head taller than him and were used to getting in scrapes."

"Just a minute," Crey said, pointing in the direction of the other tent. "You mean to tell me he's some kinda wolf in sheep's clothing?"

"He is when he fights. The rest of the time he's just like you see. If he's a wolf in sheep's clothing, sometimes he's just a sheep. But . . ."

"But what?"

"The child didn't remember anything about the fight, you see. He knew they were teasing him about his father, but after that his memory was a complete blank. The other three weren't hurt too badly, so we didn't ask too many questions."

"You sure he wasn't so excited his mind just went blank? I've seen a fair bit of that myself."

"No—but that's just my intuition . . ."

"In that case, what is he, some kind of genius brawler who loses his memory? I don't get it," Crey said, exhaling smoke flamboyantly.

"Well, whatever he is—and I didn't come right out and ask him about this—but he might have come looking for his father to clear him of the accusation of looting ruins. I don't know how he'd do that; frankly, I think it'd be impossible."

"Amen to that. Thanks."

Crey got up. Perhaps due to the wind, he had to struggle to get the door open, shoving his way through the snow as he stepped outside.

About five minutes later, there was a knock at the door. After the sealing tape had been removed, the person who stepped in accompanied by the wind and snow wasn't Dust.

"What is it, Crey?" the doctor asked in a suspicious tone.

With a rather odd expression on his face, the outlaw replied, "They're gone!"

"*What?*"

"The tent's there. Inside, it's like they just stepped out. They left cups of cocoa and coffee, both still warm. Both of 'em were there until a second ago. It's just . . ."

Though Crey's features stiffened, no terror surfaced in them. Even if he was holding it back, that in itself was laudable. Leave it to the professional killer.

"Were they taken?"

"Most likely. I don't know about the kid, but I hardly think your bodyguard would've gone without a fight. Think maybe a roaming dimensional vortex got 'em? Or did some foe come along who was so tough they couldn't do a thing . . ."

"From the castle?" Vera didn't conceal the fright in her voice. "In that case . . . it's Duke Gilzen . . ."

"It's a little late to be getting scared. When the mountain changed into that castle, we decided not to take off, right?"

"I know." Putting her hand on her chest, Vera let out a deep breath. "I'm okay. But what'll we do about those two?"

"At any rate, I'll search our immediate surroundings, and if I don't find 'em I'll give up. You're staying right here. You've got a weapon, don't you?"

Vera touched her hand to her right coat pocket, where she'd tucked a rapid-fire rivet gun. She had a rifle, too. Neither calmed her in the least.

"See ya, then."

Crey disappeared into the darkness.

After redoing the tape on the door, Vera went to the center of the tent and sat down. Anxiety gnawed at her heart.

As she was rubbing her right hand over her face, there was a knock at the door.

"It's me."

She recognized the voice as Crey's.

"Open up. If you've got a flashlight, I need to borrow it."

"Just a minute."

Running over, Vera peeled off the tape. In that instant, a horrifying thought sparked in her brain. The voice was Crey's. But was the person using it really him or not?

A snow-covered man stepped inside. Brushing the flakes off his hood, Crey looked up.

"Doc—"

His breath caught in his throat. There was no one there. The lady who'd just undone the tape was nowhere to be seen.

"Not the doc too . . . She was just here . . ."

Rooted in place, the outlaw stood mired in a bottomless solitude—but it was immediately extinguished. Someone had tapped him on the shoulder.

II

D halted.

"This is the place," the hoarse voice told him. Its tone was low, but it carried a steely confidence.

Just ten feet away was an iron plate set in a stone wall. It was thirty feet high and ten feet wide. Myriad rivets studded its surface, and on the walls to either side of it torches burned in iron sconces.

"This clown's old fashioned to the very last," the hoarse voice said.

This was the central control room.

D stepped forward, putting his left hand against the iron door. It creaked open. In light of what the room contained, this was a bit underwhelming.

"Great—this is a trap."

That went without saying. However, this young man wasn't the sort to fall back just because of that. Waiting for the trap to be sprung, D stepped inside.

"So, this is why nothing's interfered with us up till now. Even though we made it out of that elevator in one piece, it'll pay to be careful."

It seemed the Hunter had easily escaped from the iron box that dropped two thousand stories.

D pressed forward without a word.

It was a white room. D was in the very center of a plain littered with white metal. Ahead of him, at an indeterminate distance, lay a hemispherical dome.

"That's the anti-energy reactor. For all the Nobility's science, up till now they've never managed to make a perfectly stable one. One little slip-up and they go berserk. There's a theory that the reason the Sacred Ancestor had Gilzen put under wraps was to keep his reactor under control. What the—"

Cold air crushed in around D. Even the white light was frozen, the crystallizing air forming dancing flakes of ice in D's periphery.

"Oh, no . . . It's four hundred and fifty-eight degrees . . . below zero. So sleepy . . ." His left hand let out a yawn. "Be . . . careful . . . This guy . . . knows . . . about us."

"Enjoy your rest," D said softly, and he started forward.

A voice rained down from the heavens. "Oh, even without your guardian angel, you can walk, stripling?"

Though D focused his gaze, he could detect nothing save ice crystals in the air of this world at almost absolute zero.

"You can't see me because I have no form," the voice said. "I myself find it strange, but you too are a creature that doesn't seem to be restricted by your human form. Come here and you will see."

"Will you interfere?" D inquired softly.

"I suppose I will, at that. That's the reason we, the Sacred Protector Knights, returned to life. My name is Budges."

"D."

A sense of bewilderment radiated from the presence. "D? Did you say D? I've heard that name somewhere before . . . Oh, but it's been ten millennia since I last lived. I'm sure I'll remember it sooner or later. After I've disposed of you, that is!"

D sailed into space. Making one whistling slash through the air, he executed a splendid landing.

"Oh, is that where I am?" the voice from the ceiling remarked with admiration. "You see, not having any feeling in my limbs, I'm not entirely sure of my own location. You probably determined it by my voice, but this is a treat. However, no matter how competent you might be, you can't cut something that has no form." The voice laughed thinly. "That being the case, you'd think it impossible for me to attack, but it would seem that even without form I still have a mind. That will serve as my hands and feet. Like so!"

A sharp pain ripped into D's right shoulder. With fresh blood spurting from it, the Hunter changed to a backhanded grip on his sword.

"Oh!"

Not even giving Budges time to voice his surprise, D hurled his sword. The distance to the reactor was unknown, but after a hundred yards the weapon broke apart.

"*What?*" Budges cried, as if his eyes were bugging from his head.

The sword his will had fractured still continued to zip straight toward the reactor. But it was just the blade, which had broken free of the hilt. Perhaps it was too late for Budges to do anything with his willpower, because the blade flew another two hundred yards and sank into the wall of the reactor. Pale light raced through the air.

"Damn it! The wall's been breached?" Budges's voice cried out weakly. "My willpower didn't work on your blade. Who the hell are you?"

There was no reply.

D turned around. A number of figures were speeding toward him from the same direction he'd come. They were accompanied by something that sounded exactly like the buzzing of an insect. Ion

engines. D was surrounded by a number of vehicles that resembled wheel-less motorcycles. The orange-armored figures straddling them were almost lying flat. The red muzzles protruding from the fronts of the vehicles were undoubtedly laser cannons. Even D, with his left hand asleep and his sword gone, was in no position to do anything.

"Is that you, Jeanne?" the voice of Budges inquired.

"Don't use my name."

The source of this new voice came over like a celebrated actor stepping on stage. Splendid in form, like a crystal given human shape, the lithe figure wore similar armor to the others, yet was draped in a purple cape. The sword on this one's hip was more delicate than those of the other riders. The stride could be termed naught but elegant. However, the aura that gusted from her was so powerful, the men lined up there naturally stepped to one side and let her pass. "Her"? Yes, it was a woman.

With a beauty that would make males both human and Noble alike weak in the knees, she looked D straight in the face. And said nothing. Blinking her eyes, the lovely woman—Jeanne—turned and looked away. As she looked up toward the ceiling, the madly dancing electromagnetic waves truly bathed her face and body in pale light.

"Don't ever say my name again. I won't have that from a moron like you, who couldn't even protect the reactor." Such anger tinged her lovely voice.

Budges was silent.

The young woman called Jeanne then finally turned to D and said, "You did well to make it this far. I have orders from Duke Gilzen that you're to be treated courteously. I, Jeanne, shall be your guide."

Respectfully dropping to one knee, she brought her right hand against the amply curving breast of her chest plate and bowed. Her breath was white, so at least she had warm blood coursing through her.

The laser cannons on the magnetic force bikes surrounding D all lost the glow in their muzzles in unison. Suddenly, flames burst from one of the vehicles. It'd taken a direct hit from the electromagnetic waves. The rider leapt off it.

"You dolt—we have a guest here!"

But even faster than Jeanne's reproach was the hand that shot out to her right. It was unclear where her whip had been secreted, but it burned through the crystallized air like a tentacle for a single crack that rang out with earsplitting volume, and the man's head sailed into the air. Its origin still a mystery, the whip returned to the beauty's hand—and vanished.

With all the grace of a stage performer, Jeanne elegantly folded the five fingers she had spread like the ribs of a glamorous fan, then got to her feet again.

"Hey, Jeanne," the voice of the formless knight called down from the

ceiling in an agitated manner. “Has Gilzen returned yet?”

“I hope that was a jest. As the reactor has been breached, he has no choice but to return.”

Was that why the reactor was the first thing D had targeted? To make Gilzen step into the ring with him?

Having coolly answered that query, Jeanne grinned at D. Never letting the smile leave her face, she said, “Your punishment for damaging the reactor will be meted out eventually. Do keep that in mind.” It was a tone that would freeze any listener to the bottom of their heart. Though her words changed, the tone didn’t vary in the slightest as she continued, “Very well, let us be off, Sir D. Duke Gilzen awaits us.”

Her purple cape whipped around. The snowflakes danced.

Quietly D began following the female knight who’d walked off down the corridor.

Around that same time, the mayor of Mungs made a sour face as he greeted some very dangerous-looking guests. These men and a trio of military aircraft had landed on the outskirts of town, having been dispatched by the Northern Frontier Airborne Division of the Capital’s standing army stationed about a hundred and twenty miles to the north.

“An experimental reconnaissance balloon launched six months ago recorded the changes to Mount Shilla three hours ago,” their leader told them. “We understand that to be Duke Gilzen’s castle. We’ve come to destroy it.”

“That’s absurd!” the mayor protested vehemently. He had been pressed into service by Director Marquis, who was also in attendance.

He explained that an accomplished Hunter and several villagers were presently climbing to ascertain the condition of the crew and cargo of an aircraft that’d crash-landed near the castle. Until they made it back alive, an attack would be out of the question.

The military men neither laughed nor scowled. Expression still devoid of emotion like a machine, one of them said, in a mechanical tone lacking blood or tears, “Duke Gilzen lives again. Do you actually think the search party will come back in one piece?”

The mayor and the archaeologist fell silent.

“The two of you need not take any kind of responsibility. We haven’t come to request your permission. We came to inform you. The attack begins with the coming of dawn tomorrow. This is a holy act of destruction to save the entire world, Frontier and Capital alike.”

"But, at the risk of repeating what you yourself said, that's Gilzen's castle. With just three planes . . ."

"Numbers don't make the battle. It's the quality of the ordnance that counts. Our forces will be carrying new weapons that can wipe away a whole mountain chain with a single blast. My apologies, Mr. Mayor, but before the night is through, I need your villagers to evacuate a thirty-mile radius from the village."

The mouths of the two old men dropped open at this new twist of fate, and five whole minutes were wasted before summoning the servants who would need to contact the other village officials.

III

D passed before a huge door.

Perhaps the castle had been completed, or was immeasurably close to being so, because the sounds of construction no longer reached him, and the towering marble pillars and the precious-metal reliefs that adorned them now had a composed look, for all their ostentation. The floor absorbed the sound of Jeanne's footsteps, allowing even the stillness of antiquity to be felt. To get this far, they'd ridden on moving sidewalks and taken supersonic elevators, but they hadn't met a single person. From time to time a figure might be glimpsed at the end of a corridor or lurking behind a row of columns, but when the Hunter's gaze turned toward it, no one would be there.

The magnificent door was etched with weird dragons and strange flowers. Rather than giving a menacing impression, they all looked terribly forlorn.

"This is as far as I go." Jeanne halted, stepping off to one side.

Giving her neither thanks nor a bow, D headed for the door.

"How can you be allowed to enter?" Jeanne asked him. "Not even we of the Sacred Protector Knights can hope to pass beyond this door. That you, from whom our master should be protected, should be allowed to pass—"

"Ask your master." That was all he said. This young man cared not a whit for Jeanne's beauty or the desolation that seemed to cling to her query. That was how he'd always lived. And it was how he would probably die.

Several yards ahead of him, the door began to open slowly. Its heavy, dull sound gave the impression that this was accomplished not by nuclear power but by a titanic lever.

It was a vast room. You might even call it a great hall. It was so large that if a human were ordered to make use of it, they wouldn't be able to

begin to imagine what to do. People could be gathered for a game—but they could have ten thousand people on each team and would need equipment the size of three-storied palaces. The ends of the room couldn't actually be seen. Only a dim light fell from above. Looking up to the ceiling found it concealed in darkness.

What greeted D's eyes was a colossal pyramid that loomed just fifty yards ahead. Blinding. A golden glitter was trying to burn itself into his retinas. The pyramid was made of gold. And in fact, it wasn't a pyramid. There was a wide staircase up its front slope. Thirty feet up, at the summit, was a throne, also of gold, and on it sat a man in a dazzling golden cape. His face had stolid proportions that didn't suggest Nobility. But perhaps that was on account of his stubbly beard. If he had shaved, every inch of him would've had an air of pure refinement.

"D, is it?" A solemn voice echoed across the sprawling plain—and yet there was an inescapable impression of softness and weariness to it.

"Duke Gilzen?"

"Correct. So good of you to come."

"Let me ask you something first: what became of the crew that was on the aircraft with you?"

The man on the throne was silent for a while, and then he said, "That's the reason you've come here? I'll be happy to tell you. They're right there."

Suddenly there were evil presences to either side of D. Though it was unclear where they'd been, the two men stood there now. Both had their hands poised in front of their chests, as if to grab someone, and stark incisors peeked from spitefully red lips.

"I'm Del Rey, the pilot."

"Geeson, an archaeologist."

"I'm D," the owner of the handsome visage replied. "I came to find you two. But I can't bring you back now, can I?"

"Why not?" asked the master on his throne.

D didn't reply. The answer was far too obvious.

The man on the throne gave him a sarcastic grin. "I see you don't fathom the meaning of my question."

There was a loud clap. He'd brought his thin, pale hands together.

From D's right side the pilot attacked, wind churning in his wake. His evil visage, the speed with which he leapt, and the terrible claws that aimed for D's face were all those of a vampire. And realizing that, who would've believed what happened next? That one who'd received the blood of the Nobility could be slain with a single blow?

Dropping straight down from midair, he landed at D's feet. A tapered point protruded from his back in the vicinity of his heart. D hadn't used his longsword on him. It'd been a long wooden needle.

The face of the instantly killed pilot quickly turned back to that of a normal person, and as soon as it did the archaeologist to the Hunter's

left exclaimed, “What have you done, you murderer! The pilot and I are both still human. Wasn’t your blasted hide sent up here to *save* us?”

D had already seen the truth to what the man said.

“That was a human being you killed,” said the man on the throne. “Which makes what you did murder, plain and simple. How does it feel to murder a man you came to rescue?”

D asked, “So, you can turn them into either human or Noble, Gilzen?”

“Precisely.” The pale face above the lavish cape smiled. “Now, if you’d be so good as to show me what you’ll do with the other one.”

D was going to have to make a terrible decision. If this person could instantaneously switch between human and Noble, his condition at the moment he was killed would either make D a Hunter or a deplorable killer.

“Murderer! Murderer! When I get back to the village, I’ll tell everyone. I just knew you dhampirs were all—”

Geeson’s voice stopped dead. Again there was the sound of hands clapping. The archaeologist’s looks changed. The figure that bounded for D was a hideous vampire.

What will you do, D?

A scream exploded. The archaeologist fell on top of the pilot and rocked with spasms. His chest had a rough wooden needle jutting from it. Once again, D’s single blow had been precise. Just as the man was about to fall, he’d reached out to D with one hand. He’d fairly sobbed the word, “Murder . . . er . . .” And then, as if fused to the pilot, he moved no more.

A faint, nearly suppressed laughter had reached D’s ears. “I suppose that was a stupid question,” the man on the throne said with a self-deprecating chuckle. “What would you do, save dispose of the pseudo-Nobility that attacked you? Such a fearsome man. It’s a joy to meet a man such as yourself, D. Let us hope you live up to the expectations I, Gilzen, have for you.”

“You were the cargo?” D inquired.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“Then I’ll have to dispose of you,” said the Hunter. That was what it meant to be the young man known as D.

Gilzen’s eyes bulged, and then the man immediately smiled. “So, that’s how it’s going to be? My, I’m coming to like you more and more. D, might I have one moment more?”

A murderous implement flew through the air without resistance, straight for the Nobleman’s forehead—and the rough wooden needle poked out through the back of his head. For a split second, a look of incredible pain and rage skimmed across Gilzen’s pale countenance, but before he could even catch D’s eye, he grinned wearily. Three times he clapped his hands, and D’s deadly needle came out as if it were being

pushed back through, tumbling halfway down the stairs before it came to a stop.

"Not even your skill can slay me. Why not stay here in the castle for the time being and hone your abilities?" He then added, "I know quite a bit about the Sacred Ancestor."

D bounded.

Gilzen clapped his hands together. Beam weapons secreted about the room should've pierced D from head to toe. On D's chest, his pendant glowed blue. And nothing happened.

When the dashing figure in black alighted right in front of him, Gilzen gazed at him half in surprise, half in admiration. "You fight, even knowing it's pointless?"

D's right hand caught the man by the neck. Unexpectedly thin, his neck was crushed with one great squeeze.

As D gazed at the twitching Gilzen, his eyes were incredibly clear. But his ears caught someone saying, "Mr. D!" He didn't even turn to look, but the voice continued, "Everyone's here. We got caught."

The diminutive figure standing just inside the door was Lourié.

"—As I was just saying," Gilzen said as little coughs racked his crushed throat. "Oh, don't look at me like that. It puts even me in such a strange mood. Look, I must be blushing. Ah, but I read you right. It seems there does exist something that can melt your icy machinery. I know it's a terribly shopworn phrase, D, but I take no responsibility for what happens to the boy!"

"He's nothing to me."

Gilzen smirked. It would be no exaggeration to term his smile evil. "The very fact that you'd say that proves you've played into my trap. Look." He snapped the fingers of his right hand.

Darkness enveloped Lourié's body. Cries gushed into the air.

"The screams of a child with no connection to you. They don't bother you, do they?"

As Gilzen said that, bubbles of blood came out with his words. He slowly pulled his torso away. D's fingers came free of his neck, and they didn't try to find purchase on it again.

"Well, I shall welcome you as my guest." Putting his hand to his ravaged throat, Gilzen continued, "However, as the ruler of this land I must first make an example. This is how we reward filthy Hunters."

Suddenly, curved blades appeared from either side of his torso. Blades? No, clearly they were *ribs*. At the same time the left one pierced D's flank, the right rib changed direction like some clockwork mechanism, stabbing into D's heart from above. With the tip of it poking out from his back like a stake, D arched backward without a word, reeling. His body instinctively sought to pull away, but his torso was skewered.

"And here end my sanctions against this despicable character. Later,

we shall chat to your heart's contentment. Nights in my castle are long, D!"

The bizarre rib swords had been pulled out of him. At last D backed away, his body swaying greatly, and then he fell straight backward from the summit of the pyramid.

White Devil Mountain

PART TWO

Captive

chapter 1

I

D fell feet first. To be precise, he did a half flip in midair. The moment he landed, he should've bounded to a new location, but instead he fell to one knee. Gilzen's rib sword had punctured his internal organs.

A shadow drifted on the floor behind him like a stain. Though lacking physical form, it was actually a two-dimensional being.

"Stop!" The call for restraint rained down from the summit of that enormous dais. "You're not to lay a hand on that man. Back!"

The shadow halted. It remained where it was, unwilling to relent.

Gilzen's voice grew even louder, carrying hints of coercion and intimidation as he shouted, "Kindly back away—Mother."

The shadow finally backed off. With intense speed it fled in the same direction it'd come.

"I suppose there's no point in hiding it any longer. D, that was actually my mother."

D got up. Not even turning to look, he bent his knees slightly. He was preparing to pounce. The young man hadn't yet lost his will to fight.

"I am no longer in the room."

D caught the position from which the words fell, high in the air above the dais. There were grave indications of something opening behind him. The door.

"Exit that way, and you'll find Jeanne. She's to be your personal attendant. She's only a *poor imitation*, but she has delectable blood!"

A stark flash flew in the direction of the voice: a rough wooden needle.

There was no response, and soon after Gilzen's voice faded, D walked off toward the door. Apparently the wounds from the ribs had already healed. His gait was the same as always. After he was through, the door closed behind him. Still sensing it behind him, D looked at the young woman before him. It looked as though she hadn't moved an inch since parting company with the Hunter.

"I'm surprised you're still well," Jeanne murmured, as if the words were a pious litany.

"Where is Gilzen?" That was D's only question.

"That I don't know," the young woman replied, her words like a

groan in the unearthly air that froze her.

D's body swayed, and he put more strength than necessary into his legs to support himself.

"Looks like his poison's making its way through you, eh?"

Jeanne's surprise freed her from the bonds of the Hunter's supernatural aura. No doubt she had to wonder how such a horrible, hoarse voice could come from a gorgeous young man like him.

"It's an ancient kind of poison, one unknown even to me. Hey, girlie, give us—I mean, give *me* some help here."

"I have been instructed to do so," Jeanne replied, nodding respectfully. Coming up by D's side, she extended a hand to take hold of his arm.

"Don't touch me—let's go," the young man commanded in a beautiful voice that suited his ghastly appearance.

"This is a hell of a place to be locked up. Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out, I say!" the outlaw shouted, but there was no response from the corridor beyond the iron bars or from any of the other cells.

There was some light, which was a relief, but there was no sign of anyone anywhere. The stone corridor and iron bars kept silent, invested with a stillness from days of antiquity. Who could've imagined that this structure had just been completed?

After thirty minutes of hollering and bar shaking, Crey finally gave in. No matter how he protested, there weren't any guards around to do anything about it.

"This is like boxing with the drapes," he murmured, paraphrasing a proverb he'd learned while wandering in a distant island nation. "This isn't good, no sir."

His spirits were wilting. He couldn't even guess how he'd been brought here. They'd been camped out in the snow when the giant, the kid, and the doctor had suddenly vanished. While he was stunned, there'd been a tap on his shoulder—that was as far as he could recall. The next thing he knew, he was here. His clothes were just how they'd been, but the mountain-climbing gear was gone. As was his knife, of course. He'd been abducted, and there hadn't been a thing he could do to stop it. That fact drained the wanted man to his very core. His energy would return sooner or later. If it didn't, he couldn't live. But it would take time. At the moment, his spirits were at rock bottom.

Just as he sat down cross-legged on the stone floor, to his left he heard a voice he recognized say, "Mr. Crey?"

“Squirt—so, you’re okay?” It seemed that Lourié was locked in the neighboring cell. “I’ve been shouting for a while. Didn’t you hear me?”

“I just woke up. In my dream there was this dog barking, but was that you, Mr. Crey?”

“Shut up, you little dope. Forget that—can you tell me how you got here?”

“You went outside, sir, and then Mr. Dust came over. A voice from outside spoke to us. And when we opened the door, I suddenly got all dizzy—the next thing I knew, I was here.”

“Were you tapped on the shoulder?”

“No. How about you, Mr. Crey?”

“It was Gilzen or someone, I guess. Weird thing to do. But that’s fine by me. Later on, I’ll get my payback. What about the other two?”

“They’re somewhere else,” another voice suddenly said.

Crey got the impression he heard the rustle of fabric against the ground. Pressing his face against the bars, he looked down the corridor to his right—in the direction the voice had come from.

Along came a ghostly, pale figure.

“Miss Lilia?”

It was Lourié that called out to her first. Crey was so angry, it took him longer to speak.

“You lousy . . .” He didn’t finish the rest. In its place was the sound of teeth grinding.

Without the sound of a single footfall, the lovely Huntress came to stand before Crey. Crey fell silent. Not out of anger—in a rare turn of events, his spirit had been undermined by sympathy for another and despair.

Lilia’s face was pale, her lips floating like a solitary island of crimson, and from between them what should protrude but the points of a pair of fangs.

“You . . . got bit by a Noble . . . ?”

As the outlaw murmured stupidly, the Huntress before him twisted her lips into a grin. Stark fangs jutted from her gums. Lilia brought her right hand up to her neck. There was a white scarf wrapped around it.

“She hasn’t changed completely!” Lourié cried out with joy.

Lilia hadn’t been wearing a scarf back in the village or in the refuge. The reason for this change of dress was simple—she didn’t want anyone to see the wound beneath it. The teeth marks from where a Noble had bitten her. She unconsciously touched the wound—something only victims still in the process of change did.

“It’s okay. If we slay the one who bit you, you’ll go back to normal. Just hold on until then!”

Lilia pressed one hand over her mouth. She turned toward the boy. For all their cruelty, her eyes also held an odd spark of peace.

“Thanks, kid. But it’s okay. You see, I’m satisfied.”

"You can't say that. You have to overcome the temptation of the Noble blood. Control yourself—and fight!"

"You're such a sweet child." Lilia grinned. It was a human smile.

Suddenly her face jerked up. Her expression changed. The smile vanishing, she said, "They've caught you at last. So much for resisting!"

"Caught who?" Crey asked, rattling the bars. "The doctor and Dust must've ended up like us a long time ago. Which would leave—D?"

"Captured—*him* . . ."

Crey had never heard Lourié sound so hopeless before.

"Give up. To *that one*, it would be child's play to catch God in heaven above. They should've done away with him ten thousand years ago."

"'That one' ? Who's that? Gilzen? What's he intend to do with us?"

"Are you curious?"

"Of course."

"The one thing Nobles always crave is hot blood."

Lourié had the wind knocked out of him.

"So that's what you gave him? Then he'll just have to settle for what he got outta you."

It didn't look like she was walking at all, but Lilia now stood right in front of Crey's bars. Her face neared his. The two of them glared at each other. Crey's entire countenance was suffused with vermilion, and a faint smile came to Lilia's lips. Connecting the faces of the two was a current of hatred as hot as fire.

"You don't even know your own world. Poor, pathetic human—if only you were like me. Then you'd see what incredible creatures the Nobility are."

"I don't give a damn about that crap," Crey spat, baring his teeth. "As far as we're concerned, Nobles are just monsters, drinking human blood and making 'em into more of the same. They can't enjoy the light of the sun; all they can do is skulk around in the darkness all the time. Let's get this straight: the dead ain't supposed to come back again. That's the way of the world."

"Why shouldn't they come back?" Lilia inquired.

Crey bugged his eyes. "Are you some kind of idiot or something? Think about all the dead coming back to life, one after another. What could be creepier than that? This world belongs to the human race."

"Wouldn't people be happy to have dead family members come back to them?"

"Sure, they'd be happy. But if that means popping fangs all of a sudden and trying to sink 'em into my throat, then no thank you! They'd have to be sent to the next world all over again."

"You just don't see, do you?" Lilia said, her eyes giving off a red glow. "Don't act like you know what you're talking about when you don't understand the joy and possibilities of this other world, this other way of life. Fine. I'll kill you myself. I'll be damned if I'll let you find out

what this joy is like."

Letting her breath whistle out, Lilia bared her teeth. Or rather, her fangs. Even Crey pulled back in spite of himself.

At that point Lilia seemed to sense something, because she stepped away from the bars, flicked her gaze down to the opposite end of the corridor, and turned and ran off as if the two of them weren't even there.

"Why did she—the lousy traitor," Crey spat, and on noticing that he was wiping sweat from his brow he clicked his tongue in disappointment and lowered his hand again.

"Mr. Crey," Lourié called out.

Noticing the fright the boy's voice carried, Crey went over to the side of his cell.

"Someone's coming."

"I know—the sound of fabric rustling, right?"

"I don't know."

From where Lourié was, he couldn't see anything.

"Well, *I* know. But I don't know just who it could be. Most likely a woman, and a real important one, at that. Squirt, get into the corner of your cell and curl up in a ball. Don't look at 'em."

"No. I have to get a good look too . . ." His voice quavered.

That's a hell of a kid, Crey thought to himself.

Now the distinct sound of fabric swishing against the floor reached the captives' ears. The sound stopped right between the two cells. So tense they felt like their hearts were clotting solid, the two of them looked at the woman.

II

The room that'd been prepared for D was as sumptuous as that of any palace. The ceiling, walls, and floor—none of them made use of rough stone and mortar. All were fashioned of marble and glittered with gold and jewels.

"There's no antidote for the poison the duke uses. You can only rely on your own constitution. Still, it's incredible. You won't even lie down."

D had taken a seat on the sofa, and he didn't even put the cool, wet towel Jeanne offered him against his forehead.

"Your body will seem like it's burning, yet it's still freezing cold. Severe pain should be racking your muscles and bones without a moment's respite. No matter how tough the person, most die instantly, and no one's lasted two days."

The lovely young lady must've seen quite a few deaths.

"Don't worry about me. Once I'm better, I'll slay Gilzen. Go back and tell him that. If I don't get better, then that's the end of it."

"I was ordered to see to your needs. I can't do that."

"That clown's gotta have a mess of spies besides you."

Jeanne turned her blue eyes toward the source of the hoarse voice, which was like that of an entirely different person. It seemed to be coming from the Hunter's left hand.

"Look, those paintings and sculptures are all alive. Go on, tell me I'm wrong."

The hoarse challenge was followed by a different voice, this one like iron: "Vigesh's *Portrait of the Glutton*, Sandberg's sculpture *Eurydice Trapped in the Underworld*—they're priceless, aren't they?"

Jeanne stared at D in astonishment. "You're quite knowledgeable, aren't you? Both artists worked exclusively for the duke, creating artwork for this castle. Very few people even know their names." Jeanne closed her eyes, there was a pause, and then without cadence she began to list those people out of the past: "The duke, his mother, myself, the chamberlain, and—"

"—the Sacred Ancestor, right?" said the hoarse voice.

Jeanne nodded, then got a stunned look on her face. "How do you know that name? Who in the world . . . ?"

"Haven't you heard? You might be pretty, but you're a rank amateur."

Perplexity stained Jeanne's face as she stared at D's left hand.

Making a fist, D said, "Don't worry about it."

Not quite knowing what she wasn't supposed to worry about, Jeanne nodded.

"I'm going to get a little sleep," D said.

Jeanne got a dangerous gleam in her eye. "I'll stay here with you," she said.

"That dagger up your sleeve—go ahead and use it if you like," said the hoarse voice.

Every ounce of blood in Jeanne's body froze. No matter how he might appear on the surface, the Hunter should've been feverishly hot on the surface and freezing cold inside—and even mired in those twin hells, the young man had seen into her heart of hearts.

"But . . . how did you . . ."

Jeanne's query was tinged with fright. She knew at a glance that the gorgeous young man before her was no ordinary assassin. However, she hadn't known there was this much to him.

"You've had a blood lust wafting from you from the very start," D said in a low voice. "When there's some hesitation you can hide it, but a true will to kill always leaks out."

D already had his eyes closed.

Jeanne ran. With incredible speed the woman advanced about six feet, then leapt. In midair she flipped a hundred and eighty degrees, intending to dodge a counterattack by D. She didn't hurl her dagger, but rather came drifting down like a flower.

D's left hand went straight up. Before Jeanne's eyes could go wide at the tiny mouth in its palm that snapped open, her weapon's tip—fine as a ray of light—was caught tight between those little teeth. The Hunter's left hand swung to the right with the grace of a dancer, and Jeanne was thrown in an arc, her shoulder striking the floor. Based on her skill in making that leap, she should've been able to land on her feet, but her shock and despair brought about a different conclusion.

Using her other arm to prop her body up, she lifted her head, only to have something jab into the floor right under her nose: the dagger that D's left hand had spat out.

"For reasons you can imagine, I can't die just yet. Once I've gotten rid of Gilzen, I'll take you on."

Jeanne grasped the dagger. Though despair riddled every inch of her, she still burned with the will to fight.

"I won't allow you to attack the duke. Even if it costs me my life . . ."

"Your *poor imitation* of life?"

That one remark from the hoarse voice made the young woman stop. "What . . . How do you know about that?"

"From Gilzen, who else?" the hoarse voice replied.

Jeanne lifted her upper body, moving as if she'd been mortally wounded. Her shoulders were quaking.

"You can't kill me or heal me like that," D said. "Go."

"No," she responded in a barely audible tone. Golden hair swayed to either side of her face like seaweed beneath the waves. The young woman didn't realize what a miracle it was that she'd leveled a weapon at D and yet lived. "Hurry up and get your rest. I'll kill you later for sure." She chewed the words over, as if saying them for her own benefit, but D was no longer listening.

Two people were in that vast room weighted heavily with the eddying emotion of a life gambled away. One of them was at the center of that vortex, plagued by it, while the other remained coolly indifferent to the whole matter.

Down a stone passageway colored by a dim blue light walked the young woman in her armor. The purple cape flaring out behind her manifested the intensity of her resolve, yet for all that, her footsteps didn't make a

sound. She stopped in front of one in an endless row of cells, and her eyes snapped wide open. The cell was empty. And there was no sign of the boy who should've been imprisoned in the one to its left.

"Who did this?" the young woman groaned, investigating the door set in the bars. It was still locked. These doors locked and unlocked in the usual fashion. "They went to the trouble of relocking the door?"

The young woman looked up. There would be a surveillance camera somewhere.

"Play back," she ordered.

A ten-foot-wide screen of light came into being in the middle of the corridor. It showed an overhead view of the prison.

"Display only these two cells. Just the part where the intruder is present."

As she said that, the light faded.

"Nothing was recorded?"

The young woman was rooted in place.

There was no malfunction in the computer that controlled the camera. If there had been, the master computer would've instantly put a new camera into operation. The intruder had ordered the master computer to erase all data about their activities.

"Did you hear that? The only one who could do something like that . . ."

The young woman's lovely visage was twisted by a terrible hatred. Hate changes people—Jeanne was the perfect proof of that.

Jeanne halted before the same great door that a young man of unearthly beauty had entered, then exited, a few hours earlier.

"My good duke, it is I, Jeanne."

After the span of about two breaths, an enormous, solemn voice rang out beyond the door. "What do you want? I believe I ordered you to serve as D's personal attendant."

"A boy and a man have escaped from the special G III level cells."

"What of it? You come to pester me with this? For those humans, this whole castle is hell itself! The fools. They'll learn they would've been far happier staying in their cells and waiting for their blood to be sucked from them. Such is not worthy of notifying me."

"They were liberated by someone from the castle."

"Oh, yes?" Although he must've been surprised, his tone was lethargic. Perhaps that was what became of those who'd been cut off from all worldly connections for so long. "By whom?"

"A personage who could free prisoners from the finest-quality cells,

without unlocking the doors, and command the security camera and master computer to delete their image."

Gilzen's voice fell silent. The fact that Jeanne referred to "a personage" meant she probably had a good idea who it was.

"I see. Return to your duties."

"What do you intend to do?"

At that instant, her chest plate was rent diagonally and her body enveloped by pale electromagnetic waves that threw her fifteen feet before slamming her into the floor. She slid another fifteen feet across the floor before coming to a halt. Just as she was about to get up, a mass of fresh blood dropped on her from above.

"That blood won't come off. Not until you're dead, that is. That's your punishment for letting a minor incident drive you to such idiocy."

Jeanne raised her gore-spattered face. Due to the way she'd fallen, only the left half of her face was stained with vermilion.

"As you command," she said with a bow once she'd gotten to her feet again.

"Next time, I'll cut off your breast on that same side," the distressed-sounding voice informed her. "What's more, I'll pull out all your teeth, so you'll look like a five-hundred-year-old hag. Though that would still be far younger than you really are. Do not bother me with your insipid blathering again."

As soon as Jeanne had left, a voice just in front of the door said, "This is Budges." It was the formless being.

"Keep an eye on Jeanne," the grave voice ordered him.

"Yes, milord."

Perhaps the orders of the being beyond the door were ironclad, because Budges didn't ask why he should be spying on an ally.

"Brought back to life after ten millennia, and before I even have time to enjoy it the same concerns from ten thousand years ago begin to gnaw at me again. She has orders to see to D's needs, but if she does anything disquieting—dispose of her."

"Yes, milord. Women are truly bothersome."

"True enough."

"Pardon my abruptness, but may I speak?" This was how questions were usually broached.

"Very well."

"Before Jeanne or anything else, there's a man who should be disposed of first."

"I know."

"He is more powerful than any foe we fought ten millennia ago."

"Are you too trying to say that I, Gilzen, might taste defeat?"

"No, it's just, that man—there's something fundamentally different about him. Different from humans and from us. I don't know what it is, but if ignored, he is sure to become a fearsome opponent. Dispose of

him as soon as possible."

Lightning raced through the air, and an earsplitting cry of agony rang out.

"Gilzen needs no instructions from you. All of you need merely do as I say. And refrain from doing what I tell you not to."

"Yes, milord," Budges replied, the pain still raw in his voice.

III

Vera and Dust were imprisoned in neighboring cells. Both had lost consciousness for reasons unknown, and the next thing they'd known they were there. Though they didn't cause a ruckus like Crey, their situation was still just as hopeless. Since they woke up, two hours had passed during which they'd been powerless to do anything. They figured that this was probably Gilzen's castle, but not even being sure of that, there wasn't much point in talking.

"I'm sorry," Vera apologized.

"For what?"

"For causing you nothing but trouble right to the last. First your daughter, and ultimately you."

"If you're talking about the present situation, guarding you is my job. This has nothing to do with my daughter. Also, this isn't the end. You're a doctor, aren't you? Don't go jumping to conclusions."

Their conversation was taking place through a set of bars.

There was truth to what Dust said.

"You're right—sorry," said Vera.

"Don't be so quick to apologize. It gets to be a habit. You'll get to thinking if you screw up you can just apologize and that's the end of it, Doctor. Try pulling that with a man whose daughter you killed and you'll get yourself murdered."

Vera didn't know what to say.

Dust seemed to snap out of it, saying, "That just slipped out. Sorry."

"It's okay." Vera smiled wryly. "But don't be so quick to apologize."

Coughing once, Dust looked around and said, "Anyway, we've got to think of some way to escape."

Essentially, these cells were the same as those where Lourié and Crey had been held—though the two of them had no way of knowing that.

"What about everybody else? What about the child—Lourié?"

"I don't know. At any rate, we can't look for anyone till we get out of here."

"But it's no use. All we can do is wait for whoever locked us up to come back."

Dust fell silent. He had to recognize the soundness of her argument.

"But this prison is really old, inside and out," the doctor continued. "It really doesn't seem like a reconstruction of something from ten thousand years ago."

"Anachronism suits the Nobility's tastes."

"Even so, don't you think they've taken it a bit too far?"

"How so?"

"Even the Nobility's science wasn't the very best at the beginning, right? It would've progressed little by little, eventually reaching the level it's at now. Yet even for the worst Noble of ten thousand years ago, doesn't this seem a bit much to do, all of a sudden? I mean, all that time he's been sleeping deep in the earth!"

"Hmm. Now that you mention it, you've got a point there." Not one to put on airs, Dust tilted his head to one side. Apparently his motto was, "What you see is what you get," but to accept this theory in their present condition required a fairly broad mind.

"In the village archive of ancient texts there was a priest's diary that recorded Gilzen's activities. They ran it through a translation machine they picked up from a traveling merchant, but there was no mention of his technology being this advanced. Of course, the translator was secondhand, so it might be on account of that."

"In that case, you mean," Dust furrowed his brow, and after a brief silence continued, "while Gilzen was asleep for ten thousand years, his underlings acquired this superadvanced technology. No, but that doesn't fit. I've never heard about any stragglers causing trouble. Which would mean they also went to sleep, along with their master."

"Right." Pressing her face against the bars, Vera looked around the prison. "So quiet, so still. It's hard to imagine it being anything but ten thousand years old. How did they reconstruct it? Did the Nobles use technology from another dimension?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was in the diary. About six months before the day Gilzen's savagery came to a sudden end, the skies—"

Dust was the first to whip his face around. There were footsteps drawing closer. Forceful ones, and coming at a rather rapid pace. Before Vera could even turn in that direction, a figure shrouded in a purple cape stood before the two of them.

"I am Jeanne. I'm one of the Sacred Protector Knights," the armored woman said, introducing herself in a clear and resonant tone. The left half of her face was stained red. "You're the doctor, aren't you? Your skill is needed."

As the young woman looked at her, Vera became snared in a veil of suspicion. To treat whom? It was common sense that the home of the ageless and immortal Nobility wouldn't have a doctor, so if there were someone needing medical attention, would they be a human?

“Can you tell me whom I’m supposed to help?” she asked in spite of herself.

“Don’t ask pointless questions. You need only do as you are told. Open it.”

As she said that, the door to the cell unlocked without the young woman lifting a finger. “Follow me.”

Vera stepped out through the door.

Rattling his bars, Dust shouted, “Let me out, too!”

Ignoring him, Jeanne walked back the way she’d come.

As she followed after the Noblewoman, Vera informed her, “I don’t have any medicine or my medical instruments.”

“Don’t worry. Everything you carried has been safely stored,” Jeanne replied without ever looking at Vera. It was a supremely arrogant way to address her.

“In that case, why not treat them yourself?”

“I don’t know how to use human medicine.”

“Well, isn’t that a kick in the pants?” Vera said, feeling strangely confident. “So, my patient is a human being? Or is it—”

“It’s me.”

“Excuse me?”

Vera finally noticed that ever since she’d first appeared, the Noblewoman had kept her cape closed over the front of her body. However, she didn’t seem to be in any pain, and her complexion had been pale from the start.

Suddenly the floor beneath their feet moved, and Vera let out a cry of surprise. Somehow she managed to keep her balance. The six-foot-wide section of floor moved forward at an impressive speed. It was a form of moving sidewalk that could still be found in the castles of the Nobility, but the fact that it’d been realized ten thousand years earlier was hard to believe. What she and Dust had been discussing a short time earlier skimmed through her mind.

“This is quite a device to be ten thousand years old. I wonder, was your master some sort of scientific genius?”

“Regretfully, the duke is no scholar.”

“Really? Who helped him, then?”

“I believe I told you not to ask any unnecessary questions. You don’t need your tongue to work on me.”

At that threat, Vera couldn’t help but button her lip.

In the next few minutes they turned untold corners, ascended a slope, and halted on a stone pathway. Before them lay a row of iron doors. As Jeanne approached, one of them opened without a sound. At the same time, she collapsed.

Dashing over out of pure reflex, Vera asked, “Where are you hurt? Forget that for the moment—can you stand?”

Bracing one hand against the floor, Jeanne tried to lift herself but

swiftly sank again. Vera guessed she wouldn't be able to move the woman.

"Lie down. Where's the trouble?"

The young woman managed to lie flat on her back. Her resolute bearing up to their arrival had been the result of great self-denial.

"You Nobles don't make it easy, do you? Open your cape."

The problem was undoubtedly beneath it.

The instant she saw the left side of the woman's chest, Vera had the wind knocked right out of her. The heavy chest plate had been split diagonally, and fresh blood stained the woman's upper body.

"D?" the doctor murmured.

"That stripling?" Jeanne laughed in a low voice. Hers was the pale face of the average Noble, but to Vera it looked like a death mask. "This was a punishment from the duke. When you've been cut by the master, the wound won't close until his anger has subsided."

"That's just insanity. Nobles are ageless and immortal—meaning you could remain in pain forever?"

Jeanne donned an odd expression. "Does that bother you? I should think a human would rejoice at the thought of a Noble in pain."

"Not when it's my patient. I'm a doctor, you know!"

Vera tried to remove the woman's chest plate, but couldn't even understand how to work the clasps.

"I can't do anything for you here. Is my medicine in this room?"

"Yes, it is."

"And this armor—can you get it off?"

Jeanne gave a small nod and reached for the armor with her left hand. Her painfully slow movements spoke volumes about the depth of her wound.

"Hold on," Vera said, getting back up and turning toward the door. Heavy footsteps and what sounded like voices had rung out behind her.

"*What?*"

Only the astonished Jeanne down on the floor turned to look, as Vera was paralyzed.

Fifteen feet behind the doctor, a shadowy figure stood at the other end of the corridor. In its right hand it carried a long spear, and when a fist that looked like a mass of intertwined wires twisted in the opposite direction, the weapon grew another six feet in length.

"But . . . you're . . . ? When . . . did you . . . get out?"

The object of Jeanne's groaned query stood almost six feet eight inches and was covered by a tangle of silvery-gray wires. Although generally human in appearance, there was one difference—this thing had four arms. On its back it had something resembling a crossbow, there was a longsword on its right hip, and on the left hip was a weapon that could only be a pistol with a grip mounted on the front. Its head and neck were covered by a domed mask. Perhaps it was this mask that

lent the creature its inhuman sense of menace; there wasn't a single bump or recess on it. Apparently its mask was responsible for sight, hearing, and the other senses.

Jeanne groaned, "Get back . . ."

The figure didn't move. This mysterious warrior who would not follow a Noble's commands in a castle of the Nobility was a creature from another world. Its spear pointed at Jeanne.

Jeanne twisted herself around. Her right hand moved toward the sword on her hip. Her movements felt like those of a tortoise with a million miles of road before it.

The figure didn't even move its hand, but the spear flashed out to pierce Jeanne. It seemed that certain death would result.

Black stars winked in the young woman's face: her pupils. Pulling herself up, she grabbed the sword at her side without hesitation and headed for the door.

"Better now, are you?" a hoarse voice said with admiration. Jeanne knew the masked figure grinned, even though she couldn't see its expression.

The deadly spear stretched. And then it stopped.

The shadowy figure turned and looked. It faced the opposite direction from which the two women had come.

"You'll have to deal with me!"

Face pale, lips alone strangely crimson, and baring beastly fangs was the warrior woman now made a compatriot of the Nobility, Lilia, reaching for the longsword on her back with her right hand.

I

To be honest, Lourié was wandering willy-nilly. The place was just too huge, and he had no idea where Vera and Dust might be. A vast hall without a single person in it spread before Lourié. A small airfield would easily fit inside it. On all sides of him was stone—but the surprising thing was that there wasn't a single seam in the walls, floor, or ceiling. This place had been hollowed out of the rock. He'd thought about turning back, but the door had shut just seconds after he entered, and now it wouldn't budge at all. This was a one-way street—the room didn't allow you to exit again.

Shaking his head, Lourié cleared it of all thoughts of going back. Right up until the time he vanished, his father had kept telling him, "Don't look back, son. Taking the long way around is fine. But don't look back. If you look back, you'll want to turn back. And that keeps you from moving forward. The important things always lie ahead."

Along with Crey, the boy had been brought back outside. The cells had been opened and the two of them freed by a shadow cast on the floor. Or perhaps it would be better to describe it as something *like* a shadow. As it had no substance, it was difficult to make that call. Two parts of the black mass had stretched like hands through the bars to grab both of them by the ankles. An instant later, they were both outside the castle. Their backpacks had also, generously, been left there. The snowstorm had abated, and stars blinked in the darkened sky. If they wanted to make a run for it, it looked like their chances were good.

However, that's not what the two of them had done.

"I'm going back in," Crey had murmured as he gazed at the towering castle walls about a hundred yards away, seeming to gnaw the words off. His right hand gripped a knife. Whether it was the one he'd been carrying or a new one that'd been stashed in his belongings was unclear.

"Squirt, get while the getting's good. I'll raise a ruckus so no one goes after you."

At Crey's words Lourié had shaken his head, saying, "I'm going back, too."

"Why on earth . . ."

"Mr. Crey, are you going to go rescue Miss Vera and Mr. Dust?"

When those clear, innocent eyes looked straight at him, the outlaw

grew embarrassed. “Well, actually—oh, you know how it is, right?”

“So you won’t go look for them, will you?”

“Aw, don’t say it like that. It’s just—”

“That’s why I’m going back.”

“Hey, we didn’t come up here to rescue anyone! That’s just their fate. In a situation like this, you’ve got to think of yourself first, am I right?”

“Mr. Crey, why are you going back to the castle?”

“Well—I’ve got reasons a kid wouldn’t understand, you little dope.”

“If you’re going back into that castle, Mr. Crey, I think it must be a pretty important reason. Do what you have to do. But I can’t leave those two behind.”

“Squirt, how can you feel so much responsibility when you’re still just a little kid? The weight of it’s gonna crush you. Besides, what do you think you can accomplish going back to that castle alone?”

“It’s better than doing nothing.”

Crey glared at the boy. He quickly said, “Okay, do as you like. I’ll stick with you till we’ve snuck in. But if you run into that shadow that saved you, you be sure to thank it all proper like, okay?”

“Of course.”

And so the two of them returned to the castle.

The nearest wall had a rusted iron door set in it.

“Guess I don’t have much choice, do I?” Crey said, drawing his knife. “Don’t screw with me, you two-bit Noble.”

His right hand flashed out. All the boy saw was a white streak like a shooting star. The lock portion of the iron door was cut out in a neat square.

As soon as they were in, the pair split up.

“I’m going upstairs. Wanna come along?” Crey invited the boy, but he shook his head. Though he had no way of knowing for sure, he suspected the prison could only be underground.

Descending staircases and getting on moving sidewalks, Lourié traveled down farther and farther. And now, after stone walls and corridors as far as the eye could see, he was in an empty hall. There was no point in just standing around. Lourié began walking toward the center of the room. The enormous weight of the rock seemed to press down on his diminutive form from all sides, and time and again Lourié had to take a deep breath.

When he’d more or less reached the center, Lourié saw a rectangular hole open in the floor before him. A section fifteen feet long and ten feet wide had suddenly subsided—that was the impression he got. Though he was poised to run off at any moment, his eyes were drawn to the hole.

He'd found no escalators or elevators, and the stairways simply went on forever, so Crey finally sat himself down cross-legged in the middle of the stairs. Sweat dripped from him in endless streams—but he didn't even have time to spare for noticing how unpleasant that felt as his lungs gulped for air.

Someone was coming down from above.

Wiping his sweat-stung eyes, Crey looked up the stairs to where they dissolved into darkness.

A faceless creature with four arms was coming down. Its mask and garments, even its body that looked like intertwined wires, were all silvery gray, with its cape alone being crimson. The inscribed baton it carried to its right drew Crey's gaze. It was a weapon. Power instinctively flooded into the outlaw's legs and drained from his upper body.

Just twenty steps above him, the figure in the crimson cape halted. The baton in one of its right hands grew with a swish. It was a long spear. Tension knifed through every inch of Crey, becoming a will to fight that set him ablaze. Aware that his breathing was growing heavier, he turned his body into a spring and bounded off to his right.

"Come and get me!" he shouted.

D stood before the door. His gait hadn't faltered once as he traveled there, as if this had been his goal from the very start.

"I don't know either. What's behind this thing?"

The words of his left hand were overlaid with the sound of a door opening and closing.

D went inside.

It was a vast hall. Save for a few exceptions, it was a plain of stone as far as the eye could see. The exceptions were clustered near the center of the hall. There were three figures. A short one was sandwiched between a taller figure squaring off against a giant. Two of them the Hunter recognized: the short one—Lourié—and the figure in the golden cape that towered before him.

"What's that bastard Gilzen doing here?"

No sooner had the hoarse voice muttered that than the figures, who'd been halted like a movie still, went into motion in unison. The one on the other side of Lourié—a figure in a featureless mask wearing a

green cape—made a horizontal sweep of its right hand. The baton grasped in a fist that looked like twisted wire grew to over fifteen feet in length, mowing through Gilzen's neck. Sparks flew. Gilzen's right hand —and the gold scepter it carried—had parried the blow. Both actions had occurred with a speed imperceptible to the naked eye. D alone had caught them.

The gleam of the opponent's weapon drew back, then came at the Nobleman again—this time falling from above as if splitting firewood. Gilzen dodged it, changing his stance. But a split second before he did so, the long spear slashed up at him from below. It looked as if the Nobleman was constantly on the defensive. The movements of the two were succinct, with crimson sparks glowing incessantly in the gloom. Minute piled upon minute, with Gilzen always on the receiving end.

"His opponent's not bad, either. It's keeping the same Gilzen who defeated you on the defensive!" the hoarse voice said, making sure to place special emphasis on the "who defeated you" part. But then it let out a gasp of surprise.

Changing his footwork, Gilzen halted for a moment. Not missing that chance, his foe whipped its long spear around in a flashing arc—which Gilzen dipped at an angle to avert, his bizarre rib sword then bursting from his torso and stabbing into his opponent's abdomen at an angle. Letting out a cry that fell short of words, the Nobleman's foe swung its long spear, severing the stark implement of death before the creature made a great leap back.

"Looks like the tide has turned," the hoarse voice said, its words surging forward.

Gilzen pursued his foe, while Lourié remained where he was. Like a swallow in flight, D dashed over and scooped up the diminutive figure, pulling him back out of the heat of battle.

II

"So, you came, D?" Gilzen said to the Hunter without turning to face him. "Looks like your DNA responded to the alien presence after all. Yes, this is an invader from far beyond the Milky Way! As you are no doubt well aware, since Earth was first created, countless aliens have visited it. Of them all, none ever held more sinister intentions than these."

His opponent hauled back its long spear, then hurled it at Gilzen. Easily batting it aside with his scepter, the Nobleman aimed the black jewel adorning the scepter's top at his foe. The beam it unleashed was black as ink. It bounced off his opponent's chest, melting the floor by D's

feet and sending up scalding vapor. It was an insanely powerful beam.

"This light can penetrate three floors—punching through a hundred feet of rock," said Gilzen. "It looks like I have a foe unaffected by beam weapons."

"When did you get that weapon?" the hoarse voice inquired. "Ten thousand years ago, the Nobility might've been physically far superior to human beings, but I never heard their science was equally advanced. The technology they've got now is the result of ten millennia of progress. You were asleep all that time, yet you've got command of a science beyond modern levels. Is that alien technology?"

"Indeed."

Gilzen bent down. A crossbow-like weapon on his foe's back had just popped up over its shoulder. There was a sound like the dull hiss of escaping gas, which was then coupled with the strident clash of iron on steel.

"Oh?" A cry of surprise escaped the Hunter's left hand.

Pressed to the left side of his chest, D's fist held a black arrow. It'd been fired at Gilzen, who'd deflected it with his scepter and sent it to assail D, to his rear.

The golden cape danced out. Spreading in the air above his opponent's head, it looked like a gold cloud. His foe's right hand reached for some kind of gun. A crimson beam pierced the gloom and the gleaming cloud. Flaming, the cape hit the floor—but when the foe realized it was *only* the Noble's cape and turned, its body was pierced from behind by an arcing, scimitar-like rib sword. No doubt imagining the scene to follow, his foe tried to flee. But its body was pinned by the rib and held fast. The scepter brought down from overhead smashed the foe's head and sent orange brains flying in all directions.

"Cause me trouble, will you?"

Looking down at the titanic form that lay at his feet and confirming that it was dead, Gilzen turned his eyes toward D. There was a loud snap by the Nobleman's chest. The arrow D had hurled had been caught by Gilzen's chest, stopping it dead.

"So, the man called D favors cowardly acts?"

"You did it first," the hoarse voice shot back.

The fact that the arrow Gilzen deflected had gone straight at D was no coincidence.

"At any rate, the technology in this castle was obtained from these creatures. When they came to Earth ten thousand years ago, it was not the human race that tracked them down and fought them off, but *our kind*. Although the science of their weapons was more advanced than our own, none of their weapons could slay immortals. We destroyed their spaceships and exterminated hundreds of their kind, taking fewer than ten of them captive. The Sacred Ancestor ordered that they should be disposed of immediately, no doubt because he was loath to have

anyone but himself acquire their technology. I was entombed deep in the earth because I stood at the fore in the battle against the Sacred Ancestor, but also because I disobeyed him in this."

In Gilzen's fingers, the metal arrow twisted as if it were made of rubber. His eyes were burning red, as if running to ground the memories of the past.

"Yes, the Sacred Ancestor buried me in the cold, dark earth. He said our minds weren't yet ready to acquire the technology of an alien world. Such preening. If we had adopted that technology then, the Nobility could've ruled the world without waiting for nuclear war first. I have read the record matrix stored in this castle that remained here aboveground but disassembled, and I know what has passed in the last ten millennia. The Sacred Ancestor is a fool! Had we done things my way, we would've ruled over the humans while their power was still intact, and could've avoided our present decline. D, do you know what kind of future he wanted?"

The fearsome scepter was pointed at D, but he didn't flinch in the slightest.

"To a degree," he said.

"Then this should be easy to explain. To tell the truth, the Sacred Ancestor and I adopted the same approach. However, unlike him, I also used the aliens."

Lourié, who was clinging to D's waist, suddenly looked up at the Hunter.

"So they were sealed away in this castle and subjected to memory analysis? But it seems that wasn't enough."

That came from D.

Gilzen lowered his scepter and grinned bitterly. "You're right. I believed we'd adopted their techniques perfectly, but there was some flaw in the way we put them to sleep. They escaped, and now they wander the castle searching for a way out."

"How many are there?"

"Four—now three remain. They're formidable. What do you say, D? Will you give me a hand?"

"This has nothing to do with me."

"Nothing to do with you?"

Lourié's body flew a good fifteen feet, where the boy landed on his ass on the stone floor. One sweep of D's arm had done that.

"I was hired to take the contents of that coffin alive—or failing that, to destroy it. Gilzen, will you accept that you're on the road to your own destruction?"

"No, thank you."

The Nobleman's right hand rose, and then a terrific spray of sparks exploded in front of his face. The distant stone walls shook from the impact. His scepter had parried D's blade, striking in the same motion

the Hunter had drawn it.

"Are you in a hurry to die, D?"

As Gilzen leapt back ten feet, he aimed the black jewel in his scepter at D. But the strange beam that could carve through a hundred feet of rock didn't fire. With D approaching right before him, Gilzen projected his scythe-like ribs from his sides. It looked as if the one his opponent had lopped off earlier had returned as well.

A sweet-and-sour stench assailed Lourié's nostrils. A sword for a pen, and blood as the ink? In this hall where the stink of alien blood had begun to waft, they would write of a new battle, a new tale of life and death.

However, the fray came to a hasty conclusion. D and Gilzen had both turned to look in the same direction Lourié had initially come from.

"That voice—he's been finished, I suppose."

Gilzen made a light leap. D's blade flew after him. All it cut was a piece of his cape, and by that point Gilzen had reached the door.

"I'm going on ahead. I shall be back. But, D, what would've happened if I wasn't here right now, but rather was standing behind you?"

Before the Hunter knew it, the door had opened, and now it closed behind Gilzen.

"That bastard's gained the power to teleport! The Nobility's scientists couldn't make that a reality for all their trying, but it looks like the aliens had the technology to do it. Anyway, I *do* wonder what would've happened."

Despite the needling tone, D kept his silence, but his eyes suddenly shot toward Lourié. The diminutive figure was just being swallowed up by a pit that'd opened without warning. A black dagger whistled from D's right hand, sinking halfway into the gap between the closing floor sections. Walking over like a shadow, D grabbed the dagger's hilt with his left hand, and in an instant had twisted it in an impossible direction. Far off to the right something heavy moved. Beyond a concealed door loomed the entrance to a passageway wide enough for two adults to walk abreast.

"Looks like things aren't going your way, eh? D, are you gonna look for the kid? Or—"

"The search for Gilzen comes first," D informed the hoarse voice in a low, clipped tone before walking toward the passageway.

The woman had a hole in her chest that you could see clean through.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

To Vera's query, the Huntress Lilia replied, "A little. I'm sure for the real Nobility, something like this would be a walk in the park, but for the half-baked version like me it's not quite so easy." Looking at the door to the back of the room, Lilia said, "Forget me; how's she doing?"

"She" was the owner of the room they were in—Jeanne. The two of them were in an artlessly appointed living room with just a table and a few rough chairs, while the owner of the room lay in bed in the back bedroom now that her injury had been tended to.

"The wound's no great problem, but the pain won't subside. Unless Duke Gilzen lifts his curse, there's nothing that can be done."

"So that formless man is here to comfort her, then? He must be her beau."

As Lilia extended her thumb, the gesture for boyfriend in some regions, the doctor applied a sterile pad to her naked back.

"Stop moving around. And I wouldn't know anything about that," Vera said reprovingly. But as she leveled that reproach, she couldn't help but admit to herself that the woman who sat there with her thumb up was the only reason she and Jeanne were still alive.

It had been a horrifying split second—the faceless creature's gun had pierced Lilia's heart, and ignoring her as she staggered, it had drawn the longsword from its hip as it bore down on them. Vera had felt the wings of death brush her. But their foe was knocked thirty feet down the corridor, where it slammed into a stone pillar. Look as she might, Vera had seen no one there but the other two women.

III

"Get into her room," a masculine voice from midair had urged them. "Hurry. I'm going to reorganize the area."

And before their very eyes a stone wall the width of the corridor lowered from the ceiling, cutting the faceless figure off from the three women.

Thirty minutes had passed since they'd followed those directions, and nothing had happened. Apparently the faceless figure had left.

Securing her ample bosom once more in a bra and donning her beloved combat gear, Lilia stretched her shoulders. The bones creaked.

"I'm fine now. Doctor, that was an interesting experience, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," she had to confess.

Naturally, Vera had never treated a Noble or a pseudo-Noble—one who'd been bitten but not turned—before. Even though the Huntress's

heart had narrowly escaped injury, what seemed to be a kind of heat ray had blasted right through the woman—yet to the doctor's amazement, the Huntress was still breathing normally. And Vera could hardly believe that Lilia's wound had half closed by the time she put her clothes back on. If this was what a pseudo-Noble was like, she couldn't begin to imagine the regenerative abilities of the Nobility. That a primitive thing like a wooden stake could destroy them was like something out of a nightmare.

"Even if we'd left it alone it would've healed, but you have my thanks anyway, Doctor."

Lilia smiled at her, seeming no different than she'd been before—or, if anything, far more cheerful.

She's been bitten by a Noble? The only things that kept Vera from questioning that were the ferocity of the unearthly aura she'd seen earlier when Lilia had faced the featureless opponent and the white scarf wound around Lilia's neck.

"What'll become of you?" Vera said, giving voice to the question that had arisen while she was looking at the Huntress. It was a question that'd been posed by the families, friends, and lovers of countless victims of the Nobility.

Lilia smiled thinly. "It's a little late to be asking that, isn't it. You know full well."

"You don't have a problem with becoming a Noble?" Vera asked, unwilling to let the issue rest.

"There's nothing I can do about it. Oh, Doctor, in the interest of medical science, I'll tell you all about what it's like being a victim of the Nobility. Think of it as my last bit of humanity, if you will. First, for the physical stuff—well, it's a strange feeling. You feel lethargic, and yet it's like you're in prime shape—like a really powerful motor that's not firing on all cylinders, if you can understand that."

"More or less, I suppose."

Lilia's smile broadened. Incisors peeked disturbingly from the corners of her vermilion lips. A chill raced down Vera's spine.

"Great," Lilia said with an impassive nod. "Next, for the psychological effects: well, first of all, there's this respect and fear toward the one who bit you. Like the sort of feelings a servant has toward the master of the house."

In her heart, Vera sighed with grief.

"But is that your will? It's not the Noble forcing his consciousness onto you?"

"It's completely me. Come on, don't make that face. I'm not sad about it at all. I'm filled with so much more power than before, I tremble at the thought of it."

"Oh, Lilia—you'll go on to attack humans!"

"Stop it!" Lilia exclaimed, but her words were no more than

meaningless sound waves to Vera. This woman professed joy at being made a servant of the Nobility—and she had given medical aid to such a creature. If she could, right on this very spot, she'd see to it that—

"Doctor, don't get any funny ideas, okay?"

"Huh?" Vera thought the woman had her pegged.

"Doctor," Lilia said, her eyes burning red. Making no effort to disguise her naked supernatural aura, she took Vera's hand. The Huntress's grip was so cold that the doctor felt numbness before she experienced any pain.

"Stop. I didn't do anything."

"The victim of a victim becomes just like them," Lilia said, her breath brushing the doctor's throat.

"Don't!"

The lady doctor was paralyzed by the greatest fear known to mankind. Becoming a Noble—that meant devolving into a demon that roamed the night in search of living human blood. This was no nightmare. It was reality, and less than two inches from her.

"Doctor . . ."

Something hard touched the nape of her neck. It slowly poked into her. In two spots.

"Stop!"

Vera shook from head to toe.

A tiny scream rose near her ear—and moved off.

"What happened?" asked a masculine voice. It was that of the man without form.

"I don't know—look," said Lilia.

"But that's—" The man's voice was tense. "Your right hand exploded. Who did that to you? Never mind. I know."

Know what?

Vera's shaking didn't seem likely to stop. She trembled with a speed so far beyond the normal range it had injured the Huntress, but she hadn't even noticed.

"Calm down," the man's voice said. "You're an incredibly dangerous woman, it seems. There's still work that we would have you do. We won't harm you."

Vera felt her tremors abating. She opened her eyes.

Lilia was slumped against the wall, gazing at her. Her left hand held her right arm, which was missing its hand from the wrist down. No blood flowed from it. The stub was charred black. Gazing at Vera, she gave her a look that seemed to say, *Not too shabby*. Hers wasn't a very grave injury.

"What—what did I do?"

"I'll tell you later. In the meantime, you can continue your doctoring."

Vera shook her head. She was terribly weary. "I've already done all I

can for her."

"This is another case. Come with me," said the man's voice.

"But I can't even see you!"

"You can hear me, though."

Ultimately, Vera had no choice but to comply. Following the voice's directions, she left Jeanne's quarters and advanced down the corridor. Her terror of running into that faceless creature was beyond the pale, but fortunately she didn't encounter it in her travels. She asked what it was, but got no reply.

"Here."

She stood before a stone door. She didn't have long to wait before it opened. The smell of disinfectant struck her. Stepping into a room the color of a cloudy day, Vera gasped out loud and froze in her tracks.

Lourié was at the bottom of the hole, surveying his surroundings. It felt like he'd fallen more than a thousand yards, but he couldn't be sure. Halfway down it'd become too much trouble to keep track of the distance. As he fell, he wondered what kind of scientific technology the castle was equipped with. For instance, the pit that he was falling into obviously had to be some mode of transportation. But it was so primitive. Yet the way the mountain had been transformed into a castle in the blink of an eye seemed a feat that would be impossible without otherworldly technology. There was a tremendous gap between the two —and try as he might, the boy could find no way to bridge it.

I've slowed down all of a sudden, he thought, and at that moment there was a light impact on the soles of his shoes, then his body rose slowly. He realized he'd sunk into something soft, and was now rising from the recoil.

"How primitive," he said, in spite of himself.

It was the same principle as dropping something onto a sack of feathers. The thought of the bottom half of the pit—a thousand yards' worth of feathers—nearly made Lourié laugh. The boy's heart didn't lack for courage.

When he stopped rising, he found an iron door set in the wall before him. He pushed against it, and it opened easily. Stone corridors just like the others continued on the other side. All he could do was press forward. He was worried about his father—and Vera, Lilia, and Dust. Dr. Vera was kind. Lilia talked tough, but she wasn't a bad person. There was something about Dust that reminded him of his father. And he wouldn't abandon any of them. *Don't turn your back on what needs to be*

done. That was the one principle his father had impressed upon him.

"What's this?"

He was nearly out of breath when he halted.

A change had come over the smooth walls, floor, and ceiling of the corridor. Horrible cracks that took the boy's breath away ran through everything, leaving the rock beneath exposed and tilting the floor up ahead of him. He climbed a fairly steep ascent to the top of a rise.

"Did an earthquake do this?"

But Lourié quickly realized it hadn't been that. At the bottom of a great cone-shaped subsidence the far side of which he couldn't make out, an enormous dome-like tent of what could've been vinyl or metal had come into view.

"What in the world is that?"

Terror wrapped around his heart, threatening to stop it. Still, his hands and feet didn't halt. The protrusions and cracks in the rock proved useful for hand- and footholds. He descended a good five hundred yards.

At last he understood the scale of the tent. It was roughly the size of a small pyramid. Standing fifty yards high, it was over a hundred yards long. The material looked like metal.

He arrived at the bottom. All the while checking his surroundings for any sound or sign of anyone else, Lourié went over to the tent. There was no way in or out of it. Reaching for the bottom edge of the metal covering, he tried to pull it up. It lifted without any resistance. A dazzling light illuminated the boy's legs below the knees. Bending over, he squeezed through. There was no hesitation.

Light enveloped him from head to toe. Countless lights supported by iron frames were brightly illuminating an object sunk in the stone floor about ten yards up ahead. Its overall outline resembled the planet Saturn stretched out horizontally. Only it wasn't a ring that surrounded the elliptical craft; it was a disk. Both the craft and the disk were twisted at the point of some long-ago impact, crumpled and looking like the slightest push would make them squeal like an accordion. With one glance Lourié noticed that the crumpled portion of the top of the craft gaped open.

About sixty feet up, the saucer was connected to the ground by what looked to be a simple elevator. When the boy approached it, the stench of oil struck him. Apparently it used an old gasoline-powered motor. At the very least, when this craft crashed here, the Nobility's civilization could manage no more than this. Locating an operating lever on the side of the greasy motor, he gave it a pull. It began to whine. It performed just as it had ten thousand years earlier. In light of the restoration that had taken place in the castle, fixing up one small motor probably hadn't been a problem.

Getting into a box with an iron-mesh bottom, Lourié pushed a button set in the wall. With a rasping sound the elevator began to climb.

Moving at considerable speed, it soon reached the top.

From the elevator door to the crumpled front of the craft, iron plates had been laid out. More than the thought of how much effort that had entailed, it was the thickness of the saucer skin Lourié saw during his ascent that made his eyes bug in their sockets. It was like gold leaf. It was less than four hundredths of an inch thick. Forget what would happen if it collided with something; it seemed as if the approach of a candle would be enough to melt it like lead. Yet it felt overwhelmingly strong beneath his feet.

The damaged portion had a hole in it large enough for two adults to pass through side by side. Halting, Lourié fought to control his breathing. Fear of the unknown and unmistakable excitement burned in his chest.

Sufficient light filled the damaged section of the interior. Apparently the crew's sense of sight didn't differ greatly from that of human beings. Judging from the form of the foe he'd encountered in the great hall above, he thought the craft wouldn't be much different from one built for humans, and things were pretty much as he expected. The passageway and walls were made of the same material as the saucer, which didn't seem incongruous. However, the tilt of the craft was steep, and Lourié quickly abandoned plans to climb up higher. As there were no handrails, he kept both feet planted firmly and followed the passageway lower—descending into the nose of the craft.

Something strange happened after the boy had gone a few yards. It felt as if his body was being pushed against the floor—and the instant he realized the truth, the mystery of it was solved.

It's creating artificial gravity, Lourié thought, standing up straight. His body was at an angle, but it stood perpendicular to the floor. Even after ten thousand long years, this thing still worked! The computer that ran the craft had begun to create a comfortable environment for the new "crewman" that'd boarded it.

It came as no surprise there were signs of terrible destruction where it sank into the ground, with the walls cracked or utterly crumpled. It seemed unlikely Lourié would be able to advance any farther. On the right wall of the corridor he spied what appeared to be an elevator. There was a switch to the right of it. Though he pressed the up button, nothing happened. Down. That one lit up with red. Another door into the unknown opened.

The boy's body trembled. His eyes were agleam.

There was no switch inside. The walls and ceiling were made of a material that might've been either glass or plastic. He touched it in a number of places, but there was no response. Thinking for a moment, he said, "The lower deck."

The ceiling gleamed and the door closed.

"It understands what I say," Lourié remarked, but he had no time at

all for surprise before the door opened.

He thought it must've been an error, but the scene outside was different. He'd arrived without even the slightest sensation of moving.

Oddly enough, the lower deck was less damaged than the front portion. The elevator was at the center of two intersecting corridors, and there was a door to either side of it.

Standing before the closer one, he commanded, "Open."

It opened.

Taking a cautious peek inside, Lourié gasped. Something hot bubbled up beneath his feet, and his body quaked violently.

Death Within, Death Without

chapter 3

I

The room was stocked with what looked to be weapons. There were row upon row of them, some looking like rifles and pistols; others looking like tubes resembling mortars, long spears, and swords that appeared for all the world to be made of bronze and iron; and others that seemed to be crystals fused together into weapons the use of which was unclear. Dozens of each kind sat on the racks, gleaming. All were probably ready for immediate use.

Lourié's eye was caught by a small handgun. While swords and spears were commonplace on the Frontier, the much rarer firearms and laser blasters were the object of many a child's adoration. Keeping his senses keen for signs of anyone else, the boy went over to the rack near the back and reached out for the gun—

The door behind him opened.

As stunned as Lourié was, his body still went into action. There was a space between two racks. Ever since entering the room, he'd had his eyes open for someplace he could hide. Children who lived on the Frontier were wise enough to know there was no telling when or where death might open its maw for them. Hiding himself, he held his breath. His eyes stared straight ahead. If you wanted to look at something too badly, your foe would detect your presence—and that could mean your life.

Heavy footsteps entered the room. From behind them came another set—this one fairly light. The steps of an ordinary human.

A burning curiosity needled Lourié. And it was coupled with fear.

Who the heck is it? Are they with one of those things?

The answers came from the new arrivals.

"This place . . . It's an arsenal?"

It was a man, his breathing so feeble it seemed it might give out at any moment. It had to be—

"Mr. Crey?"

The blood chilling in his veins, the boy slapped his hand over his own mouth. Where he'd heard the footsteps, he now sensed a malevolent presence. And immediately, the footsteps headed straight for him.

Lourié wasn't about to sit there and silently await his fate. He dashed

farther into the gap. The sound of footsteps continued. His heart seemed like it was going to explode. He could see the far end of the gap. Though he couldn't be sure, the exit seemed better than staying where he was.

The boy burst from the gap like a person possessed. A black wall loomed before him. The faceless figure had just drawn its longsword with its right hand and what looked like a pistol with its left.

"Lourié? That's you, isn't it, squirt?" he heard Crey say behind him.

Why didn't the boy feel the tiniest bit of relief? Why did he think, *Don't come near me*?

The pistol-like weapon was trained on his face. Green glass was set in its barrel. This was a weapon the alien that Gilzen defeated hadn't used—and when it went off, it would be the end of Lourié. The barrel of the gun whipped to the side. Light the same hue as the glass shot out, making a circular stain on the floor about fifteen or twenty feet beyond the boy. The stain was glowing. Once the light faded, the floor had been burned through in the shape of the stain. The barrel was jerked back toward him, and Lourié was paralyzed. However, his foe returned the weapon to its place on its belt.

Lourié understood his foe's intent. It was trying to intimidate him. It pursued its prey and frightened it, and when its prey was then powerless to resist, the thing would probably bring its sword down with evil satisfaction.

The enemy fell back. It speculated that it had the boy thoroughly cowed. Turning its back to him, it went over to a rack of rifles, took one down, and braced it against its shoulder. It was weird how close to a human it was in its movements.

"Don't do it."

As those words were spoken, the figure that stepped between Lourié and the barrel of the gun grabbed the weapon and twisted it upward.

"Mr. Crey?"

"Run for it!"

Though the face that turned toward Lourié was much paler than he remembered, it was definitely that of the outlaw he knew so well. The enemy used the second arm on its right side to draw the sword from its hip.

"Go!"

Lourié ran like mad for the door. In the doorway, he turned and looked. The faceless figure was just stabbing its blade into Crey's chest.

"*Mr. Crey!*"

Closing his eyes, the boy dashed out the door. After that, he didn't really remember what happened. His nose slammed into something. Lourié could feel blood gushing from it as he fell flat on his back. He was in a corridor in the castle.

The boy opened his eyes. Another of the faceless figures stood there. That wasn't all that strange. This was their "home," after all. Without

the slightest hesitation, the creature thrust the sword from its hip down toward Lourié's face.

"Return," Gilzen chanted before setting the summoning charm shaped like a reverse swastika on the table. He took a deep breath. This was the result of his extreme state of concentration. He sensed a presence moving behind him. Turning, Gilzen looked down by his feet. There was only one being who could enter his research center despite the guard sensors.

"Mother dearest—what brings you here?"

The shadow replied in the voice of an old but still sharp woman, saying, "Where has that man gone?"

"Are you referring to D?"

"Indeed I am—ah, that you say that name so flippantly! Your confidence always runs to excess."

"I do not take the man lightly."

Selecting a test tube from the equipment and tools littering the large table, Gilzen held it up by his eye. It was filled with a dark red liquid. Something a Noble could never mistake—blood.

"That is why I work so feverishly to accomplish my great desire in an expedient fashion. This serum should take care of everything. My dreams—and those of the damnable Sacred Ancestor."

The shadow fell silent. It was a heavy silence, as if she'd lost her voice from the very start.

Her next words were unveiled as Gilzen opened the locker beside him and took out a syringe. "Do you intend to repeat the same foolish sin, Duke? I came to stop that. Stop already. The Sacred Ancestor saw success but once. All of his later efforts were ultimately in vain. Not even you can hope—"

"The Sacred Ancestor was too fixated on human beings."

Gilzen raised the syringe full of blood before his eye and gazed before him. He stared not at the syringe, but at the black curtain that loomed behind it.

"He met with a single success," said the Nobleman, "but that was no more than the result of a coincidence. Therefore, he was never able to accomplish it again. His ideal cannot be reached with humans, you see. That's what I always asserted. We must seek the possibility outside, I said. What good fortune we had—they came to us, did they not? Like so!"

As if crazed, Gilzen grabbed the cord that hung by his side and

pulled it. The black curtain that towered before him parted down the middle.

Behind it was a glassed-in room. A bizarre figure was hanging from the ceiling. Suspended by wires, the body of the four-armed creature was stained with a hue that could only be described as bluish green, though that was far from accurate. Its body closely resembled that of a human, but its muscles were braided like wires and the location and form of its joints were hardly what we would call normal. That probably determined the directions its limbs could turn. Its face was as long as a horse's, but sunken in the center. Compared to its strangely large and almost perfectly circular eyes, its nose and the cruciform split that was apparently its mouth were very small, like a baby's, so that while the teeth visible in its maw were keen as a beast's, they could actually be termed cute due to their tiny size.

"With no help from anyone, I captured these invaders from outer space. Even now we don't know where they're from, but I saw the tremendous value in them. Their value not as invaders, but as volunteers from the stars to help us carve open the future."

Gilzen rapped mightily against the glass with the scepter in his hand.

"This is blood. We Nobles aren't a new race that suddenly came into being ten thousand years ago. Our origins go back far earlier, to the time of Earth's creation, making our kind ancient in comparison to the human race. I don't know if it's because of that or for some other reason, but at that point in time ten millennia ago, our species was already losing its vitality. Only the finest among us noticed it: myself and *him*. That is, the Sacred Ancestor. However, he and I took the possibilities of the Nobility in different directions. He tried to create a fusion of human and Noble, while I wished to mix our blood with that of aliens. My experiment had begun with their arrival. And for a while I was successful. Nobles injected with the alien blood I developed exhibited strength unimaginable in our kind."

"And the Sacred Ancestor couldn't forgive you for that," the shadow woman said. It was the tone of one recounting a bitter memory. "He was ready to dispose of all the new Nobles you created and to hurl you and this castle into the pits of eternal destruction."

"Before he could, I used superadvanced technology acquired from the aliens to seal the castle away in 'memory time,' and the Sacred Ancestor changed my punishment to entombment deep in the earth." Gilzen looked down at the shadow at his feet. "All because of something you said. Mother, the Sacred Ancestor complied with your wishes. Why was that?"

"Ah," the shadow said, writhing as if it quaked. "Please don't ask me that. That I cannot tell you. I merely tried to save you. I am thankful to the Sacred Ancestor."

"What's done is done. I thought it was something like that. But then

he came. The potential they call D. He shakes me from my principles." Gilzen chuckled. "You must fall, D, if I am to keep my hand on the rudder and steer the Nobility into the future."

"I'm frightened, Gilzen. My son, I have such fears. The instant I beheld that gorgeous youth, I thought I would faint. *Ah, has the Sacred Ancestor reappeared?* I thought to myself. If that is the case, Gilzen, that young man has come to bring about your end. Cast all this aside, and you and I can go somewhere where there are no humans or Nobility—out among the stars." Her tone was nearly pathetic.

And in response to his mother's heartfelt concern for his well-being, the son replied with this: "Leave me."

No desperate plea came from her. Instead, she said, "I have set explosive charges on this floor. In less than ten seconds, this accursed laboratory will be destroyed, Gilzen."

At her horrifying words, an evil grin came to Gilzen's lips. That was all.

"What a foolish act for my mother to commit. It would appear you've grown not a speck wiser in ten thousand years."

Gilzen brought the syringe in his hand up to his neck—and drove it into his carotid artery.

The instant he finished injecting its crimson contents, the heavens and earth rumbled. Gilzen smirked. The smile was still frozen on his face as the floor and ceiling of his laboratory collapsed, and both he and the shadow were swallowed up by the chaos.

II

Destruction ran tooth and nail through the castle's interior, and in accordance with the building's strange construction, it struck in the most unlikely places. Two floors below the laboratory not so much as a speck of dust stirred, yet the underground prison took a direct hit. The next thing Dust knew, he was outside the prison. The wall before his eyes was split open, with pitch blackness filling the gap. One after another, cold specks struck his cheeks. Snowflakes. There was a snowstorm raging. His right shoulder hurt him terribly. Though he turned back for a look at the prison, he couldn't see it for the mountain of rubble. There was some question as to whether the prison had actually been there or not.

He put his hand against his shoulder. It was clearly broken, a critical injury for a bodyguard. Getting up, he turned his eyes toward the crack. As soon as he was through it, he rolled off to one side. His left knee felt like it was burning from the inside out. There was a fragment of

something stuck in it. He intended to cool it off with the snow. Sticking his leg in the snow, he reached for his shoulder with his left hand. He had no intention of fleeing. As long as Vera and Lourié were in the castle, his job guarding them wasn't finished.

After he'd put snow on his shoulder a number of times, the sound of snow under foot reached his ears. The being that'd saved them from the mountain folk flashed to his mind. They didn't know yet whether that was a friend or a foe, and the footsteps might also be those of the mountain folk. He didn't have a weapon. Dust picked up a chunk of rock that lay at his feet.

The snowstorm was fairly strong. Up ahead, a gray figure came hazily into view. He couldn't tell the range. It was probably twenty yards or more away.

Sleepiness suddenly assailed him. The snow that dulled his pain had numbed his consciousness.

If I go to sleep, I'll die. This is no good.

He tried to snap out of it, but his consciousness started to slide away. He put his strength into his right arm. An acute pain, like his shoulder was being ripped off, restored his focus.

Dust opened his eyes and followed the shadowy figure with them. It stood right in front of him. Displaying a wild growth of hair and beard, the man wore an old pair of goggles and battered clothes that were like animal skins knotted to a parka. The bow he carried and the quiver on his hip made Dust tense up.

"Are you . . . Lourié's father?" the bodyguard asked.

The pair of vacant eyes in that deeply snow-burned face reflected Dust. Suddenly, they burned red.

D halted. Since leaving the hall, he'd been wandering the castle's interior for more than an hour. Even his left hand's sense of direction had become befuddled.

"The castle's layout is like a labyrinth," it said. "If it were one of the Nobility's mazes I could manage something, but it uses alien laws of physics. Probably technology those faceless bastards brought with 'em. From what I hear, that clown's got a rivalry with the Sacred Ancestor, and he aims to make another you! With Gilzen's combat abilities trumping yours and stuff from wherever those UFOs call home, he could probably do it."

"Where has Gilzen's chamber shifted to?"

"See, the thing is, the blueprints I memorized keep changing, over

and over. Now—it's kinda indistinct. It's vanished from the blueprints."

"I can't just keep walking around."

"I know that. But where are we supposed to go?"

Suddenly the floor beneath the Hunter began to move. It was the moving sidewalk Vera had ridden. D stayed on it. With no set destination, there was no need to get off.

He jolted along for about five minutes but encountered no one.

"Too damn big," the hoarse voice said, and its impression was right on the mark. Wherever the skirmishes were taking place, they hadn't spread to where D was.

In the next ten minutes of riding the moving sidewalks, D changed the section he was on three times. Even the hoarse voice was quiet. It was the Hunter who seemed to choose the path to their destination.

At times disembarking from the moving sidewalks, at other times boarding them, before long he came to see an enormous door up ahead. Though one characteristic of the ancient Nobility was having every imaginable place covered with carvings and sculptures, this door over thirty feet wide and fifteen feet high was utterly devoid of ornamentation. Before that glossy bluish-black surface D stepped off the moving sidewalk. Flames burned in iron braziers to either side of the door.

"Here?" the hoarse voice inquired. It too seemed to understand this was the new destination. "There must be some vortex of supernatural air here that drew you all this way. Only the tiniest portion of it is escaping, but look at me—I've got goose bumps! Do you hear that?"

D nodded. His eyes gave off a red glow. And look, peeking from the corners of his trembling lips—the fangs of a vampire.

"You hear them, don't you—the noises those inside are making?" the left hand said. "They sense you, too. Your presence. They're scared, and in high spirits, and filled with joy. At the thought of eating you up, that is. Don't do it. I ain't saying they're more than you can handle, just that it's a waste of time. That, and there's the concern that your psyche might get warped. Oh, those eyes, and those teeth of yours—and what's with that blood? So excited you've chewed through your own lip? I don't care how cool and collected you are, so long as you've got Noble blood in you, you can't fight the thrill of battle. Okay, let's move along now!"

D's right hand went for the hilt on his back.

"Stop! Don't do it!"

The left hand's shouts stretched out to the side. At the same time D let out an insane cry and drove his sword into the great steel door. There was smoke. Still poised as he'd been when he struck with his blade, D didn't move. The blade of his sword was stuck in the steel, and his left hand reached for the brazier. Little by little, the flames burned his hand. Suddenly letting out his breath, D allowed the tension to drain

from him. As he stood up straight, he pulled his blade back out, then brought back his left hand. He closed his melted fingers tight. He'd stuck his hand into the flames of his own volition. The heat of his flesh burning had returned him to his senses. His blade hadn't cut very deeply into the door.

"You're crazy," his left hand told him. D's fingers were already back to normal. "We really escaped by a hair's breadth that time. The cut may be shallow, but I can't believe you managed even that much. You truly are *his* own—"

"What's that?"

D, why do you have to ask that in a way that makes the blood run cold in all who hear your query?

His left hand fell silent.

D's eyes turned to the far end of the moving sidewalk. A second sidewalk ran in the opposite direction, parallel to the first. Far down it, a number of figures appeared. All were on their knees or leaning on what appeared to be spears, having the air of the wounded about them. In fact, the men actually were covered in blood, and their breathing was faint. They were soldiers of the same Sacred Protector Knights D had fought. But they weren't just returning from a battle with him—those who'd turned a blade against D were left worse than wounded.

Suddenly the soldiers turned around. Letting out cries of fear, they leveled their weapons.

A tall figure was coming down the moving sidewalk with long strides. It was one of the faceless, four-armed creatures. One of its right hands held some sort of pistol, and one of the left ones a sword. Apparently it'd lost its long spear and crossbow in the course of the battle.

One of the soldiers got up and hurled the sword he held. His foe's left hand shot out, and the weapon was deflected with a sound of unearthly beauty, piercing the heart of the soldier who'd thrown it. The remaining soldiers didn't choose to flee. Taking weapons in hand, they charged their enemy en masse. A split second before they did, one at the very back of the group turned in D's direction. Their eyes met. It was only for a moment. The soldier then followed the others.

Sparks sprayed from the faceless one's sword, and the weapon that resembled a pistol sent a succession of green rays flying. The soldiers the ray struck in the chest glowed with the same hue, dissolved into a mere outline, and abruptly vanished. Only the last one remained.

The soldier charged forward with a shrill cry. Its stance and movements made it clear that here was someone who'd fought better than most in training. A blast from the gun in the foe's right hand was easily deflected, and then the enemy's longsword flashed out.

Something heavy thudded at D's feet: the severed head of the soldier. It gazed sadly at D. This person hadn't wanted to die. Not after returning

to life for the first time in ten millennia. The soldier was a woman.

D raised his eyes. The four-armed foe was just about to pass him. It saw the Hunter. Striking the pose of a vengeful guardian deity, it stepped from the moving sidewalk. There it halted. Nor did D move. The gun came up. The barrel of the weapon got the faintest green glow—and then it faded. Blue light swayed against D's chest. Returning the gun to its hip, his foe drew its longsword.

At that point, someone said, "Don't get in my way."

D turned his eyes alone toward the speaker.

The voice came from the same direction as his foe. A new figure glided over. Sword raised by the side of her head like a baseball bat, it was the Huntress Lilia who glared at the enemy.

"I'll deal with this thing!"

The enemy also heard her. As it turned toward Lilia, it also leveled its firearm. The flash of green light passed beneath Lilia's boots, vanishing into the depths of the darkness. As she came back down to earth, Lilia swung her blade down at the top of the enemy's head. Her right hand, lost to Vera's ultra-high-speed vibrations, was now as good as new. Her opponent parried the blow with its firearm. The blade of the sword cut the gun in two, halting there. The creature's other right hand had grabbed Lilia's wrist to stop her.

"Let go of me!"

Her body writhed in midair, and the enemy thrust the sword in its left hand at her. It then twisted in a physically impossible position to split the flash of a stark wooden needle. Still gripping Lilia, the foe turned toward D. That face devoid of eyes, nose, and mouth blew an egregious air of malice at the Hunter.

With the right hand that'd hurled the needle now going for the hilt of his longsword, D took his first step forward.

III

"Using a woman as a shield? Looks like that move holds true across the universe, eh?" the hoarse voice declared in a tone of utter contempt.

"Damn it all! Let go! Let go of me!" Lilia cursed.

"Don't move."

At D's icy words, she settled down.

"Use her as a shield if you like, but that's one less arm you'll have free!"

D didn't wait for his statement to rattle his opponent. It wasn't even clear if it had any effect on the creature.

His foe came at him, thrusting. As D circled around it, dodging, the

creature's elbow turned in an impossible direction to send the blade toward the Hunter's neck. Continuing to circle, D parried the strike with his own blade straight from the scabbard. Would it be better to call that a miracle or ungodly skill? A stark gleam of light shot diagonally from his still-circling form. With the sound of the alien's flesh being hewn, the strange arm that gripped the sword was taken off at the elbow.

Shuddering from head to foot, the enemy backed away. Perhaps the reason D didn't pursue it was because he envisioned the scene that followed. Lilia's body became a spring as she shot up, delivering a vicious kick to the enemy's chin. The enemy reeled backward and Lilia did a somersault, landing on the ground.

D sprinted. When his foe reflexively raised its remaining three arms to shield itself, it probably had the same plan in mind that it'd used against Lilia: grab D by the wrist or elbow. But all of its arms had been lopped off. The enemy stiffened, radiating the fear of death no living creature could hide at such a time, and D gazed at it for a moment. His opponent had used a woman as a shield. A heartbeat later, D's sword slashed straight through the alien. The faceless one was split in two from head to crotch.

Not even looking at the body, which split open like a folding fan as it fell, D turned to Lilia. There was neither sympathy nor relief in him. It was just as if he'd turned that way, and she simply happened to be there —until now. D's gaze focused on the scarf wrapped around Lilia's neck.

"I was chasing that thing!" Lilia said, glaring at D, but she soon realized her error. Her expression was swiftly melting into rapture. You don't try to stare down D.

"I d-d-didn't n-n-need your h-h-help!" she continued, her voice reduced to a stutter.

D said in a chilling tone, "Your blood's been sucked, hasn't it?"

A fearful moment flowed by.

". . . Well, what if it has? You'll cut me down?" Lilia said, her tone challenging. She was willing to take up the gauntlet.

"No one's hired me to cut you down. That's all that matters, so long as you're not in my way."

His black back spread before Lilia, then dwindled. He'd boarded the moving sidewalk going back the way he'd come.

"Hold up. Where do you think you're going?" Lilia asked, picking her sword up before she too boarded the sidewalk.

The killing lust that billowed from D at that instant made her jump back in fright.

"To find Duke Gilzen? You could spend a year looking for him. You know, I happen to know where he is."

"Really?" said the hoarse voice.

"No, I'm probably lying—so, what's it going to be?"

"Lead the way."

Lilia snapped the fingers of her free hand.

"That's what I like about you. Keep heading this way to southwest gate number 2001. From there we go underground."

Lilia's voice trembled violently. No, it wasn't her voice that trembled; it was the whole world. Cracks raced through the floor and ceiling. The moving sidewalk stopped. A klaxon had begun to wail intensely. A tremendous energy had been released, grinding through the floor like a wave, but the two of them looked around impassively. That act in itself was incredible.

"Below us, right?" Lilia said, closing her eyes. She seemed to be scanning for the origin point of the energy wave.

It went without saying this was the result of the explosives set by Gilzen's mother—the shadow woman.

"Let's hurry. Something might've happened to the UFO."

"UFO?" the hoarse voice inquired. "So, they had their mother ship after all, eh? I'm surprised—"

—*you knew about that*, the hoarse voice was about to continue, but it fell silent, as if it understood. Those bitten by the Nobility received the Noble's memories, and could see what the Noble was seeing at times. Now Lilia shared Gilzen's memories.

"What happened?" D asked in a cold tone.

Lilia closed her eyes and shook her head. "That much I don't know. But it was something pretty serious."

Lilia stood to the front as they zipped along.

"Why would you tell me where Gilzen is?"

"Why? To get the reward for bagging him!"

"Ah," the hoarse voice exclaimed with admiration.

"At first I was stuck on him, but at some point I went back to being the same old me. The Nobility's victims all refer to the one who bit them as 'the great one,' or something, but I just said, 'that guy.' "

"Haven't seen one like you in a dog's age. So, you're a half-awake?"

Without exception, all victims of the Nobility took a subordinate role to their Noble at first. They'd fall under the Noble's mental control. But even if that happened in ninety-nine point nine into infinity percent of cases, it would never remain true one hundred percent of the time. For every rule was subject to the same phenomenon—it always had its exceptions. In this case, it was victims who, though serving the Nobility, perfectly retained their former characters. While they were fully pseudo-Nobility, they also had a very real animosity toward Nobles that kept the victims from being completely at rest—which is why they were called the half-awake. D was now looking at one of those rare exceptions.

"So, you're the fly in Gilzen's ointment? Odd, but he doesn't seem the type to be so careless."

"He's not about to sweat the likes of me," Lilia said in a self-

deprecating fashion. “The only thing that concerns him is you, D. And in my current state, I can understand why.”

“Oh, and why is that?” asked the hoarse voice.

“I’d better not say. Even I couldn’t live with my head lopped off. D, you’re probably something far more important than you ever imagined.”

“Hmph. Well, I’ll be,” the hoarse voice trumpeted boastfully.

As they hurried through the vast castle, Lilia shared everything she knew about Gilzen and his plans. D’s pale, beautiful visage remained unchanged, like that of a corpse drifting underwater, but the hoarse voice groaned, “I thought as much. He’s got some crazy ideas, that one. This is not good at all. If Gilzen succeeds in his attempts, even if only for a while or on a small scale, he’ll have made some awful monsters, without a doubt. He’s experimenting with this stuff on himself?”

“That’s not quite clear. I couldn’t catch that.”

“Which means that damned Gilzen probably is using himself as a guinea pig. Trouble, yessiree.” And then, in a low tone so Lilia wouldn’t hear, the hoarse voice continued, “Since the girl’s been bitten by Gilzen, she should have a share of his power. She could transform at any time. Stay on your toes.”

D didn’t reply. However, if the time came, the young man’s icy psyche would doubtless see his blade cut down Lilia.

Before long, the savage scars of destruction spread before the eyes of the pair.

“Where are we?” the hoarse voice asked Lilia.

“His lab. It’s an odd mix of biological and chemical stuff.”

“But why did they wreck it? I don’t think any biological or chemical research could cause such an intense explosion.”

“The place was rigged with high explosives. Only one person could manage that without Gilzen noticing,” said Lilia.

“Who?”

Lilia shuddered. The question had come from D.

“Gilzen’s mother. I don’t really know her story, but now she’s just a shadow.”

“A shadow?”

“Would you just pick *one* voice and *stick with it*?”

“Okay,” the hoarse voice said gravely, and Lilia turned a despairing look up to the heavens. “What do you mean by ‘a shadow’ ?”

“Gilzen’s mother did something really out of line, and as a result her son turned her into a two-dimensional life form.”

“Hmph. Some family life they must have! But what’d she do that was so bad?”

“It was her connection to the Sacred Ancestor.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

Stunning both the Huntress and his left hand with that remark, D

turned his head to the right without another word. “Isn’t that right, Lady Carr?”

From somewhere in the rubble, a gloomy but refined female voice that even made the Hunter’s left hand groan replied, “That is correct.”

Stunned, Lilia strained her eyes to see but could find nothing.

“So you came after all, D. I suppose you heard about me from the Sacred Ancestor, did you not?”

“Yes.”

The voice fell silent. Humanity suddenly returned to Lilia’s stern expression. It was just such a silence. Then, eyes bulging, she stared at D. It was fine that D might’ve been acquainted with Gilzen. After all, the passage of time meant nothing for those descended from the blood of the Nobility. However, to know of a connection between Gilzen’s mother and the Sacred Ancestor was an entirely different matter. Could it be that this young man was actually the Sacred Ancestor’s . . .

“You were the architect of this destruction, weren’t you?”

“Correct.”

“Was Gilzen destroyed?”

“Do you believe he would be?”

“No.”

It wasn’t D who replied. As the group turned their eyes toward the voice, a mountain of rubble weighing thousands of tons rose smoothly into the air.

I

The staggering weight was pushed off by a quadruped machine that called to mind an insect. The entire thing was colored gold, apparently in keeping with the tastes of Gilzen, who sat in the driver's seat. Looking down at the group from a height of over eight feet, he said, "Under the laboratory was where I stored my mobile weaponry. What will you do, D? Care to tangle with this for a few laughs before we get to chatting?"

He coupled his taunt with abuse. But D wasn't the kind of young man to walk away from a challenge. He stepped forward without a word. As a cold, eerie aura radiated from him, the Huntress and the shadow woman could only look on, frozen. The insectival weapon seemed to be crafted from special alloys. Even with D's ungodly swordsmanship, it didn't look like a very even fight.

"This isn't necessarily a weapon I had intended to press into service. Using the knowledge and technology I gleaned from the miserable aliens, I put it together on a lark."

When Gilzen's voice was heard from the control pod of the machine, it failed to convey the usual deadly air of ambition. Now a heavy, languid air drifted steadily from the Noble called the most abhorrent in the entire history of the Nobility.

One of the machine's front legs clanged forward. D didn't move. His right hand was still reaching for his hilt. The instant his opponent betrayed its next move, that same hand would surely go into deadly action.

Perhaps confident of his overwhelming physical superiority, Gilzen said nothing as he advanced in the machine. As its front legs moved forward with motions more fluid than those of a human being, a silvery glint shot out, unaccompanied by any battle cry. The streak of light called to mind the arc of a supernatural blade.

Lilia cried out.

A metallic leg had been lopped off at the joint. Before the knee of the severely listing machine could make contact with the ground, a brownish ichor gushed from the joint, slapping against the floor.

D kept his sword low, not moving.

"You lousy piece of trash!"

The cockpit opened and a golden figure flew out, taking the form of

Gilzen when it landed.

"You deserve to die."

He kicked the nearest leg, and the gigantic machine rolled over with a rumble.

"What's *this*?" Lilia said, amazed. *This was supposed to be alien technology?*

"Guess it wasn't out of the testing phase, eh?"

Gilzen reacted to the hoarse voice, saying, "Applied technology, you see. A piece of junk from ten thousand years ago. I, however, am another matter!"

His scepter was extended toward D.

"Ah, that's right," Gilzen said, "beam weapons don't work on you. Well then, tangle with *this*."

He gave his scepter a swing. The opposite end grew over six feet, and from it appeared a spearhead over eighteen inches long.

Lilia stepped forward, saying, "D, leave this to me."

"Sure thing."

As the hoarse voice spoke, the Hunter grabbed Lilia's right shoulder, and in a heartbeat her consciousness sank into darkness. Quickly scooping up the slumping figure, D artlessly tossed her onto the floor to one side and made a leap. The blade he had raised high whistled as it drove for Gilzen's head. The spearhead parried it. A strange sound came from the palm of D's left hand, making the Nobleman's eyes go wide. Gilzen staggered. The spearhead broke in half, and the Noble it should've protected sprayed fresh blood from his head all the way down to his solar plexus.

Landing like a supernatural bird, D closed on Gilzen. After splitting his head, would the Hunter now deal the coup de grâce? Or would he—

There was a *thunk!* and D leapt back.

Lilia gasped out loud. The instant she'd regained consciousness, she'd witnessed Gilzen's scepter piercing D's chest. As D's right hand held his sword in line with the Nobleman's eye, trickles of red began to drip from the corners of the Hunter's mouth. Gilzen's blow had broken his ribs, and they in turn had punctured his lungs.

Putting one hand over the split in his head, Gilzen slid it smoothly down his face. When it came away again, the cut had vanished.

"When it comes to the life sciences, we're slightly ahead of them," Gilzen said. "Unlike our kind, they have a limited lifespan. As a result, they strove to achieve immortality through science, and to some extent they achieved it. I applied their science to myself. As you've just seen—your blows don't affect me, D!"

As Gilzen's massive frame took a tentative step forward, the air seemed to recoil.

"This is serious trouble," the hoarse voice said from the vicinity of D's left hip. "Run for it—or that's what I would tell you, but it's

probably not going to do any good. Anyway, run for it!"

Naturally, D was unmoved by the cries from his left hand.

For her part, Lilia drew her sword. "Leave him to me," she said, her eyes giving off a red glow. The glow of a vampire. "D, I was bitten by this clown. I gained his powers. His alien powers, too."

She was about to leave without even waiting for the Hunter's response when a silvery serpent stretched toward her chest.

"Stay out of my way," D said.

If you don't, I'll cut you down—that was how Lilia read him. The sword tip against her chest pulled back far as the Hunter braced his longsword for action.

"Fine. You're the competition. Let's see once and for all how we should divvy up the take, okay?"

"A falling-out among colleagues?" Gilzen laughed. "Very well, I shall wait. Whichever of you wins, it'll undoubtedly leave me with one less hindrance. However, let me say this." The Nobleman's eyes were the color of blood. "Woman, I decided something when I first laid eyes on you. You are to be my new guard. Now, use all the power at your disposal. Try to slay D. However, you do so by *my* will."

As the Nobleman said that, every trace of emotion drained from Lilia's face. Expression as vacant as a Noh mask, the Huntress and her sword were tinged with a terrific supernatural aura. It was a mix of Gilzen's unearthly air and the aliens' vitality. And now, it'd made a foe of D.

"More trouble, eh?" the hoarse voice could be heard remarking with disgust.

D's sword swung back to Gilzen. Did he not know that Lilia was behind him and off to one side, her longsword raised high?

Before Lilia's blade could enter the deadly fray, a troubled tinge surged into her face. As if an invisible hand were drawing back her sword, Lilia pushed desperately against the weapon, trying to back away.

"D . . . You know what's happening, don't you?" she said, iron words forged in her heart falling from trembling lips. "This . . . isn't my doing . . . Gilzen's blood is at work . . . you see . . . I'm begging you . . . D . . . Kill me . . . Quickly."

Lilia's fierce will must've allowed her to break the spell of the Noble's blood. However, her face instantly went blank again. Her boots trod across the floor, one leg pushing the other forward. One step . . . then another.

D made no attempt to turn and face her. Was he completely focused on Gilzen, or did he have faith in Lilia? No, no matter what happened, he undoubtedly considered her not worth the trouble.

However, at that moment he coughed, and fresh blood spattered against the floor at his feet. Lilia closed on him. Her eyes were those of

Gilzen. At that moment, Lilia put incredible strength into her lower body and was about to charge forward when she looked up and off to the right. Just then, Gilzen had turned in the same direction.

A klaxon was ringing.

"Display!" Gilzen commanded.

Where his eyes met the ceiling an elliptical area formed, depicting a scene of blue sky and a white peak. It was a view of the outside. Off in the distance, four aircraft that seemed to be helicopters were approaching.

"Ah, here's something rare. They called these 'helicopters' long ago. The style has changed, but they're still in use some ten thousand years later? Are they so very useful, or has there been that little progress?"

"They're carrying real trouble," the hoarse voice said.

"Nuclear missiles," Lilia murmured absent-mindedly, but it was unclear whether that was the influence of Gilzen's blood at work.

"Some fools, some human representative who no longer remembers how fearsome Gilzen can be, must have dispatched them on learning of my return. D, a truce for the time being."

"No."

Gilzen turned in amazement to find a stark flash of light right before his eyes. As his head was being split once more, he declared, "Sacred Ancestor's freak!" Bloody foam erupted from his mouth, and just as it was about to hit the floor, the Nobleman suddenly vanished. He'd teleported.

Lilia opened her eyes wide and gave her body a ferocious shake. Gilzen's spell had been broken. Apparently she could recall what'd happened, because she said, "D?"

When she turned, she found the young man in black had already sheathed his blade.

"But he—"

"Probably gone to do something about the missiles," the hoarse voice replied. "Noble castle or not, it won't be able to weather a direct hit from a nuclear warhead. If those are tactical warheads, one should be enough to vaporize everything. Oh, they're closing on us. By the size of 'em, they're about five hundred yards from a safe detonation range . . . four hundred . . . three . . . Oh, there it is!"

From the bottom of the helicopters that'd just become recognizable to the average human eye black objects dropped in unison. White smoke trailing in their wake, they impacted in the center of the midair screen.

Lilia balled her hand into a fist.

The screen glowed white. One million degrees of burning white light engulfed not only Gilzen's castle, but the entire peak known as White Devil Mountain.

Lilia rubbed her eyes, saying, “We’re still alive, eh?”

Two shadows—or, to be completely accurate, three shadows—were cast blackly on the floor.

“The missiles scored a direct hit, right? And they didn’t misfire. So, how are we still okay? Did he have some sort of alien force field up?”

“Nope,” the hoarse voice replied. “The outside of the castle was toasted. Vaporized the instant they hit.”

“In that case, why are we—what’s the story here? Is this place made out of some special material?”

“No, but it’s the same as Gilzen. Even the stone has regenerative abilities, it seems.”

“Even the stone?”

“Probably thanks to alien technology or something. Otherwise they wouldn’t be able to travel across the universe from some distant star. The ship and its crew would’ve decayed before the forces of time, yet they conquered space. Oh, what’s this?”

From the bottoms of the helicopters on the screen missiles were once more closing, with white smoke trailing behind them.

“More nuclear warheads?”

“No, those are normal missiles. Do those idiots think conventional weapons are gonna work against someone who laughed off nuclear warheads?”

“Who are these clowns?” Lilia jeered.

“Clueless soldiers—sent by the Capital, I’m sure. They should get while the getting’s good. They won’t get off with just apologies—”

There was no need to say anything more. No missile impacts or flames were shown; instead, great black spears fired from the castle pierced the helicopters. Fireballs swelled from two of the aircraft and the remaining pair dropped listlessly, spouting flames.

“Iron against the assault from outside?”

Lilia nodded at the hoarse voice’s comment.

But D alone remained focused, asking, “Where’s Gilzen?”

His job wasn’t finished.

Lilia chuckled faintly. “This way.”

Tossing her chin in the direction of the ruins and starting to walk, she looked down at her feet and said, “Hey, where’s the shadow?”

D knew that Gilzen’s mother, Lady Carr, had left without a sign when the nuclear attack had occurred. Relegated to a life of creeping across the ground by her son, the woman undoubtedly still had things to do.

Saying nothing, D began walking in the direction Lilia had indicated.

Gilzen was satisfied. The attack by his foes without had been completely negated, and he'd seized a chance for victory over D. Though his mother remained a problem, that would eventually be resolved when he disposed of her. He assumed she wasn't dead already. Mother or not, he wouldn't allow anyone who'd crossed him to live.

Looking to the sky, he called out, "Jeanne!"

The figure of the warrior woman came into view. It was the same sort of three-dimensional image D had seen.

"I'm here," she replied.

"Is Budges there as well?"

"Yes."

"Anyone else?"

"Guhoro, Bayanjar, and Tovsk are safe, along with their subordinates. The rest—were slain," she said, not sounding terribly sad.

"By D?"

"No, the aliens. The wounded have been flooding in, so, as you can see, we're treating them at the moment."

"Be done with them. They're useless."

Jeanne was at a loss for words.

"Did you hear me?"

"These are people who returned to life after ten thousand years of waiting. And the very day they came back, they were injured. More than two hundred of them have already been reduced to dust."

"What of it? If a hundred are lost, I'll simply bring back a thousand more. More than a hundred thousand are loyal to me!"

Again, Jeanne didn't know what to say.

"I'm giving you an order now. Anyone who has lost so much as an arm or a leg is not to be treated; they're to be disposed of!"

". . . Understood."

Once the floating image of Gilzen had vanished, Jeanne said, "Did you hear that?"

From the back, in a spot hidden from Gilzen's view, came a reply: "I certainly did."

"Even knowing that's our liege Gilzen's way of doing things, I can't accept it."

"Still, we can't turn our back on him. We are servants who've sworn our allegiance to the duke."

The last voice belonged to Budges. There wasn't so much as a shadow to him. "What's come over you, Jeanne?" he continued. "Never

once have you gone against the duke's way of doing things."

The warrior woman looked down. "I—I was originally human," she said in a voice that sounded like she was wringing blood from her throat.

Budges was speechless.

"Gilzen drank my blood, and valuing my skill in my human profession of warrior, he selected me for this. Budges, I have dedicated my new life to our liege, Gilzen."

To be precise, it sounded like she was coughing up blood as she shouted.

"What's wrong, then?"

Jeanne shook her head feebly. "Nothing. I am a faithful retainer."

"That's right," said a threatening voice from the back, enveloping the other two. It came from a strapping man whose right arm hung limply from his shoulder. Set in his square face were equally square eyes that gleamed with a dauntless spark.

"Lord Bayanjar—oh, and General Tovsk as well."

Although she bowed her head reverently, Jeanne's tone carried thorns that suggested her deference toward the two armored warriors was sarcastic.

"Is it not our honor as fighting men to pledge our lives to Duke Gilzen, to the last bit of flesh and blood?" said a man covered in armor right up to and including his face—General Tovsk, apparently. Jabbing out a finger that seemed to be made of steel and pointing it in Jeanne's direction, he continued, "It would appear to me from your every act that the two of you harbor defiance of and scorn toward the duke. Take care, lest you suffer for it later."

Budges's voice rained down on them, saying, "Yes, but if we comply with the duke's wishes, Lord Bayanjar, we must also dispose of you, sir!"

His square face twisting with loathing, the man with the injured right arm looked up at the ceiling, but was unable to see the man who'd just spoken.

"My, but that human woman has done splendidly!" Jeanne said, her eyes turning toward the far end of the room.

The room appeared to be a kind of VIP lounge, and up by the ceiling floated an elliptical screen like the one that'd shown Gilzen. It depicted a scene that could only be described as ghastly. Blood-soaked soldiers stood in lines, slumped, or lay on the floor as they received medical attention. Their physician was Vera. Surprisingly, the rest of the doctoring was being done by less grievously wounded soldiers. As they weren't doctors, it was only natural that their attempts at disinfecting their compatriots' wounds, wrapping them in bandages, or stitching them closed were crude, but as they fervently attended their work, Vera watched over these quick studies, giving them pointers or reprimanding them, and the lone woman was an inspiring sight. For a while, Jeanne

and the two military leaders could only watch her with fascination.

Before long, Jeanne said, “We were fortunate to have access to medicine and basic medical equipment.”

The two men nodded agreement reflexively.

This castle didn’t really have much in the way of drugs or medical devices for treating the gravely injured—in fact, it didn’t have any. As to why this was the case, Gilzen’s words minutes earlier had made that abundantly clear. Soldiers were completely disposable. When injured, their wounds would either heal eventually, or they’d be reduced to dust. It was a miracle they had the few medical supplies they did.

“This woman is only making matters worse,” General Tovsk said in a parched voice. “The duke has spoken. I shall go and dispose of the others.”

General Tovsk started walking toward the door. No one pursued him.

After several twists and turns of the corridor, General Tovsk halted just before the moving sidewalk.

“What do you want with me, Budges?”

From the stone ceiling a voice replied, “There’s just one thing I’d like to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“Are you absolutely determined to deal with the wounded?”

“Those were the duke’s orders. Ordinarily you and she would’ve been tasked with it, but since I believe that might be painful for you, I shall do it in your stead. You should thank me for this.”

“They’re brave people injured in hard fighting against D and the aliens!”

“That is a grunt’s job.”

“They didn’t wait ten thousand years to be reborn just so they could die, sir.”

“You test my patience!”

A cylindrical device on General Tovsk’s right shoulder swiveled around, its end pointing up at the ceiling. There was a dull pop of compressed air, and an iron arrow pierced the source of the voice before jabbing into the ceiling.

“You think Tovsk needs advice from a formless wretch like you? Do you have any inkling how you’ve angered me? Begone. I shall discipline you for this later.”

As he walked forward without a glance back, above him the voice spoke again, saying, “I suppose there’s little point in asking you to reconsider, is there, sir?”

“Budges!” the general exclaimed, his right hand going for the gun on his hip. He made it look as if he were pointing it in the direction the voice had come from, and then with ungodly speed he spun around, letting off a crimson blast of light in the opposite direction—at the floor. As boiling steam rose from it, groans could definitely be heard.

So, the formless warrior could be injured by physical attacks?

"I can see you, thanks to the eyes in the special suit of armor developed for me using the alien technology. Of course, your psychic attacks are also the product of the aliens' technology. Do you want to die by an alien weapon?"

"Not at all, sir."

With that intrepid reply, General Tovsk's body was tossed into the air. Shooting thirty feet down the corridor, he slammed into a stone staircase. His back arched across the edge of the steps. Just as he was about to slide down them, the general shot up to the ceiling, this time hammering flat against it. Comparisons to a pancake wouldn't have been inappropriate.

From Tovsk's insect-like mask, a solemn voice inquired, "Are you trying to kill me?"

"I have little choice in the matter. Unless I can get you to see reason."

"That's how it's going to be? Then, I don't suppose you intend to let me down from here, do you?"

"I do not, sir."

"I shall have to let myself down, then."

"*Oh!*"

Budges's cry of surprise was pierced by a crimson light. It was a beam General Tovsk's weapon had fired as he released himself. This time the flames that enveloped part of the ceiling were accompanied by a cry of intense pain.

Landing without a sound, the general hauled his head back and laughed. "This weapon responds to my will. Actually, it's exactly like your psychic attacks. This is how the technology is meant to be applied, Budges. Well, there's no point in letting you escape now. The murderous intentions you harbored toward me have earned you your death."

It was not at the ceiling but rather at the base of a stone pillar to his right that he aimed the barrel of his beam pistol, but then the weapon spun in a wide arc to the left.

The tall figure coming down the moving sidewalk from the far end of the corridor was clearly an alien.

There were two flashes of light that looked like a single beam.

"*Oh?*"

The general looked down at his hand, and the alien did the same thing. Both held smoking pieces of melted metal in their hands. Miraculously, the deadly beams they'd fired off so quickly had each vaporized the workings of the other's weapon.

"You lousy . . ."

Nothing from the alien.

The shoulder of each bore a crossbow that was aimed at the other. Iron arrows powered by compressed gas appeared to stab into the left

side of each combatant's chest—then ricocheted off.

"It surprises me not that the inspiration for my own armor should work so well. Is this what I need to finish this?"

The general's right hand went for the sword on his hip, the blade singing as it slipped from its scabbard.

The enemy raised the long spear in its left hand into a fighting pose.

General Tovsk charged forward, making the ground tremble beneath him.

III

A long spear against a longsword—no matter how you looked at it, the sword seemed at a disadvantage. It was a matter of the difference in length between the weapons. The second the general stepped within range of the spear his sword would be next to useless while his body would be in range of a spear thrust.

It was unclear how General Tovsk could accept that, but his steps never faltered as he faced the long spear head-on. Without dodging the long spear when it stretched toward his chest like a gleam of light, the general hurled the sword he had in hand.

Two clangs overlapped. The long spear slipped across the general's chest, and the longsword bounced off the enemy's throat.

Grabbing the long spear with both hands, the general swung it to the right. Though he'd intended to wrest it from his foe, that didn't go as planned. When he'd swung it, his opponent had gone with it. Paying no mind to that, Tovsk swung it again. The massive form of his foe slammed into a stone pillar, shattering it. The enemy fell to the floor.

"After an intensive study of your armor, I added strength-boosting technology to my own. It's not surprising the original model doesn't measure up to it in a test of strength. Before I take care of our own worthless lot, I shall do away with you. Here I eliminate one of the duke's anxieties!" the general said, raising the long spear to strike with his right hand. "I can't pierce your armor, but it would appear I can batter my way through it. I wonder if your next stop is a different afterlife from ours."

The spear was flung. Just as it was about to pierce the enemy's mask, it was cut in two, falling at the foe's feet.

As the befuddled General Tovsk looked all around, a figure sailed down from where it had been clinging to the ceiling. Powerless to do anything, the general had his right arm taken off at the elbow. Staring at the fresh blood that spouted from it as if in disbelief, he then glared at the figure who'd landed before him. It was a man clad from head to toe

in a lustrous black garment. An oddly shaped knife glittered in his right hand.

"This stealth suit doesn't even trip your master's sensors. And it seems like the power of my Deadman's Blade has been boosted, too."

"You . . . You're human?"

"Nope. When I was human, I went by the name of Crey. It's strange to meet like this—but hello, at any rate."

"When you were human? You mean to tell me you were . . . by *this thing*?"

"Yep," replied the man in black who'd identified himself as Crey, his voice carrying a mysterious hint of desolation. "I was bitten. All of their kind got bitten by ol' Gilzen, as you probably know. So, this one should've been at Gilzen's beck and call, but even though they're bitten, seems these things are a lot more likely than humans to keep their own will. And my master, well, it's one of 'em."

The general still couldn't believe it. More than Crey's words, it was his own wound that shocked him. A horrible sense of humiliation burned in him worse than any pain. *One of my arms taken off by a damned knife?* The only way to lay that humiliation to rest would be to slay this opponent—an error in judgment caused by confidence in his own war record. Instead of calling on the crossbow on his shoulder, he rushed barehanded at the foe he was about to rend to pieces.

Though the general was still well out of range, Crey's knife flashed out. It was unclear whether it was the material of the blade or Crey's skill that did the trick.

The general's body ran right by Crey after the outlaw had hastily stepped to one side. A now-headless body. Copious quantities of blood slapped against the floor once the general's body had slammed into the moving sidewalk.

As the large body was slowly borne off into the depths of the darkness, Crey in his black suit watched it go for a while, but before long he turned to the still-prone alien and said, "Not too impressive of you, master. Just keep lying there. I'll go get rid of Duke Gilzen and the rest!"

Perhaps the alien had recovered enough to understand the jibes, because its massive form rose like a swelling sea.

"Okay, we going now? Time to look for Gilzen!"

Crey led the way, with the gigantic alien following along behind him.

Once the two of them had gone from view, from the opposite end of the corridor the slightly impatient yet cool voice of a woman said, "I came out of concern for Budges, and what should I find but another troublesome foe. Not even I could move against him immediately. However, that one may yet prove useful. Budges, are you okay?"

Vera wanted to scream. There wasn't enough medicine. It was something for which the Nobility, priding themselves on their ageless and immortal nature, normally had no use. What was stocked in the castle was probably kept there for the use of human servants, so it was in unavoidably short supply.

The wounded poured in one after another, some with arms or legs cut off, others with necks half-severed, some split open from the throat to the solar plexus so that their entrails hung out—all of them would've died on the spot if they were human, so it was incredible that Vera had maintained her sanity. Instead of simply passing out, she was able to treat their wounds out of a combination of fascination with the vitality of the Nobility that allowed them to survive in such a state and a sense of duty as a doctor. She treated not only true Nobles but also those they'd turned, and while there was some difference in healing ability between the two, even the latter exhibited regenerative powers no human possessed.

Wounds of that degree should've healed in seconds for the Nobility. However, this time they were left with horrible scars just as a human would be. When she asked one of the soldiers assisting her about it, Vera received a daunting reply that made her pursue the matter no further: "It must be some difference in the way they were cut." Since she knew they'd faced either D or what were apparently aliens, she had no choice but to accept that. They could probably manage such a thing.

After about three hours, they were out of medicine. Cries of pain still filled the room, and the scent of blood eddied as if conducting a ghastly symphony.

"There's nothing else we can do. Do any of you know someplace else there might be medicine?"

At the query from the sweat- and blood-soaked woman, her erstwhile assistants exchanged looks, and one of them replied, "We don't know of any. But I've heard there are still some things packed away belowground that haven't been opened yet."

"Could you go down there and get them?"

He shook an anxious face from side to side. The aliens that'd defeated them still prowled the castle.

"I see. I'll go, then," Vera said, standing up. Her eyes were ablaze with determination.

"Why would you go to that much trouble?" asked a female soldier acting as a nurse, unable to conceal the surprise on her face.

Another soldier said uncertainly, "You're a human, and we're

Nobility!"

"You're patients, and I'm a doctor!" Vera replied flatly, and the soldiers gazed at her with an oddly placid look in their eyes.

"Please, stay here. I'll go," one of them told her, grabbing a laser rifle that was propped up against the wall.

"I'll go, too."

"Me, too," said the female soldier. "It'll be nice to get in on the glory for a change."

Now it was Vera's turn to stare at the Nobles. She was witnessing a quality scholars in the Capital unequivocally stated their kind did not possess—self-sacrifice.

"Stupid Nobility," Vera heard herself say in a low but emotionally charged voice.

The bloodstained soldiers grinned thinly. They seemed to be mocking themselves. That was all they intended to leave as a parting gift when they stepped out on the road to death.

"See you later."

"Hold the fort."

"We'll be right back."

Turning their backs to her, the soldiers headed for the door.

The wounded were waiting in the adjacent room. At the moment, treatment had been put on hold. Leaning back against the iron door she'd just shut, Vera heaved a deep sigh. She didn't feel like accepting any more wounded. Taking a seat in a steel chair, she found herself assailed hard and fast by sleepiness.

She awoke to the sound of an iron door creaking.

The soldiers are back, she thought.

The iron door was half-open. A glowing figure entered. She immediately realized who it was.

"Gilzen!"

"Don't address me with such insolence, lowly human," the Greater Noble in the golden cape said, showing stark fangs while the right half of his body remained shielded by the door.

Vera grasped for something to say but didn't fare well.

"On awakening after ten millennia, I find the minds of my vassals have changed greatly. My command to dispose of the hindrance hasn't been put into action. It would be simple enough to delegate this to machines or someone else, but I thought it best to use this opportunity to put the fear of me into their bones, so here I am."

More than the disturbing nature of his grinning visage, more than the overwhelming air of the supernatural that billowed from him, it was what intuition told her lay behind those words that made Vera shudder.

"Hindrance?" she said, thinking, *What in the world is Gilzen doing here?*

"First, behold the fate of the traitors I encountered on my way here!"

Gilzen revealed the other half of his body. Something dangled from his right hand.

The breath caught in Vera's throat. She could almost hear the blood draining from her own body.

"Look!"

Gilzen threw what he held. There were three objects, and they fell with a dull thud at Vera's feet. They were the heads of the valiant soldiers who'd left a short time before, blank expressions still on their pale faces even as their mouths continued to open and close.

"Filthy turncoats!"

Gilzen swung his scepter. It grew like a long spear, shattering the three severed heads. The heads turned to dust and spread across the floor.

"But you . . . They were your own subordinates . . ." Vera said, shuddering with horror. Her voice quavered.

"My subordinates? They were worthless troublemakers from days long gone. Like the wounded in there."

His blood-red eyes shot a glance at the neighboring room, and Vera felt her blood run cold.

"You . . . No . . . You wouldn't . . ."

Gilzen stepped away from the doorway.

Vera got up from her chair. For a while she couldn't move, and then she slowly took two steps. Sucking air into her lungs, she ran as she let it out again. Dashing past Gilzen, she slipped through the doorway.

There was nobody in the room.

Her foot stepped on something that wasn't stone. She knew what it was then. For a hundred yards in all directions the floor was covered in gray dust.

It took her a while to bring her suspicions all the way to her lips.

"You . . . The people who were in here . . . All of them . . ."

"I shall soon raise new subordinates. This castle has ten thousand soldiers."

"Everyone has just one life. That goes for humans and Nobles."

"What an intriguing thing to say. However, there's a difference. A human lasts at best a hundred years, while the lives of the Nobility are eternal!"

"That life is cursed!"

Gilzen suddenly tilted his head back and laughed. "Life, life, accursed life. Ha ha ha! Life can't be cursed or anything else. In this world if you breathe, and eat, and survive, that is life! Although in our case that would be 'drink blood' instead of 'eat.' "

"In that case, why are the Nobility facing extinction?" Vera said, her words cutting deeply.

For an instant, a tinge of pain spread in Gilzen's expression. He thrust his scepter into the air.

“Before I was forced into that sleep, I knew this was coming. I knew it, and so did *he*. That is why we searched for a means of averting it. He sought it within the human race, and I in outer space. Which of us was correct will soon become clear. When I have slain D, that is.”

Vera convulsed as the red eyes slowly turned toward her.

I

Can you sense which of us was correct?" Gilzen asked the doctor. "Me, or *him*? The boundless potential of the universe? Or a tomorrow propped up by those who crawl upon the ground like insects? Well, it matters not. There's little point in asking you this. But why not let you slake my thirst?"

When Gilzen faced her head-on, the impact was intense. Vera got the feeling the whole world was going to pieces.

As Gilzen took a casual step forward, he reached out his left hand.

"Stop . . . Don't come near me!"

Everything around Vera became an illusion. Skewered as she was by fear, only she and Gilzen were real.

"Stay back . . . You can't! I just knew it . . . You Nobles . . . You really are the devil!"

"No, I am the messiah."

As Vera retreated, her back hit a stone wall. There was nowhere else to run now.

Gilzen's hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"Oh, what's *this*?" the duke exclaimed with surprise, pulling his hand back.

The doctor's body was a blur, and the Greater Noble's fingertips had felt a blistering pain. When Lilia had been about to give Vera the kiss of the Nobility back in Jeanne's quarters, the doctor had undergone this mental and physical transformation—and now it was happening again.

Gazing with satisfaction at the doctor as she lost her human form, Gilzen said, "Fascinating. I can only recall witnessing this once before, and after the transformation the psyche also changed in extremely odd ways. How will she be changed, I wonder?"

It must've interested Gilzen greatly, but he didn't get a chance to see for himself. Perhaps noticing something, the Greater Noble of the darkness spun around in a fashion that left the air swirling in his wake and proceeded to the door of the room where he'd just perpetrated that cruel slaughter.

Two figures stood there, one on either side of the corridor: an armored alien warrior and Crey.

"So, you've come after all, have you? You know where to find me.

Because you have my blood mixed with yours."

Gleaming with an unnatural light, Gilzen's eyes reflected the pair.

"Aliens don't react the same way humans do," the Nobleman continued. "However, they are still my servants. Shall we see who is the master and who the slave?"

"Me first," Crey said, stepping forward. The weapon in his right hand might've been an alien knife. Pointing to the alien, he said, "My master's power has changed me. Now I can fight you on equal terms. Face me—and my Deadman's Blade."

"Foolish insect!"

And with that tired epithet Gilzen's scepter stretched. Its beam caught Crey in the chest, which absorbed it the way sandy soil sucks up water.

"Hmph!" Gilzen snorted. "So, you've been coated to absorb beam weapons? That's certainly something their technology could accomplish."

The scepter in his fist grew even longer. Swinging around neatly, it sped down at Crey's head. It only appeared to be swift—yet the blow was also powerful enough to shatter a boulder. As the scepter slashed down at Crey, the outlaw's body darted out of the way like a fish swimming through the rapids.

The scepter came back with a whine. Gilzen was in no hurry. His opponent had backed off.

The Nobleman's neck was split halfway through. Fresh blood gushed from it like a fountain. Making no effort to close the wound, Gilzen tilted his head back. His own blood poured down on him like rain. Mouth open wide, he let it soak him. And look at the rapture on his face! The way he smacked his lips. He was drinking. His own blood was a fountain, and he was drinking it dry.

Both Crey and the alien were rooted in place by this most unsettling scene, but only for a moment, and then Crey's right hand flashed out. Gilzen's neck was cut halfway through on the opposite side.

"Ha ha ha!" the Greater Noble laughed, but how he produced the sound was a mystery. Grabbing his own hair, he jerked his head up, pulling it clean off with only a few bits of muscle and vein still trailing from it.

"This 'Deadman's Blade' of yours is impressive," the head dripping lifeblood told Crey. "Is its edge thanks to the aliens? At any rate, if it doesn't slay me, it's all rather pointless—as long as you're bound by the musty old legends that all you have to do is cut off a Noble's head."

Gilzen returned his head to his shoulders. A streak of black lightning slammed into his face, blowing brains out the back of his skull. Pulling back the long spear that had been driven through the Noble's head, the alien never took his eyes off Gilzen. The misshapen mass of flesh and bone began to swell. Flesh formed flesh, veins knitted together, and red

blood pumped through them.

Clicking his tongue in disappointment, Crey shut his eyes. He was focusing his concentration for another go with the Deadman's Blade—with the alien technology on his side, he might've stopped Gilzen's regeneration.

However, he wasn't able to do that. Behind him, he heard a voice say, "Let go of me, you idiot!"

When Crey turned in astonishment, his eyes were greeted by two figures. One looked exactly like his "master," and it held Lourié—who was thrashing his limbs in an attempt to gain his freedom! Deep beneath the castle the boy had seen the alien mother ship, and after being pursued by an alien who'd returned to it with Crey he'd been captured by another alien—but why had he been brought here, of all places? The reason went without saying. This alien had been bitten by Gilzen, and unlike its compatriots, this one had become his servant.

As Crey stood still, rooted with amazement, the black scepter pierced his abdomen. Shuddering with an agonized death rattle, the outlaw's body was hoisted into the air.

"Oooh," Crey groaned, the sound causing spasms in the gloom, while Gilzen's laughter hammered the stone walls.

Using just the strength of one arm, Gilzen dashed the assassin's body against the stone floor. He fell right at the alien's feet, but during all this time it had been paralyzed, offering Crey no help at all. Needless to say that was due to tension and shock at the fact that Lourié had been captured by one of its own kind. This was what happened when someone was forced to fight another that knew all their secrets.

"He's beyond saving now. Child, is there something you wish to say?"

"Yes, you bet your life there is—let me go!"

"Very well, you may have it your way. As for the other one," the Nobleman said, turning an intense look on the enemy alien, "I shall dispose of it now. Wait just a moment."

Without delay the alien foe backed away, and a heartbeat later it had vanished in the distance.

Lourié ran over to Crey. When he dropped to his knees by the outlaw's side, tears flew everywhere.

"Mister! Don't die on me. You can't!"

Crey grinned. In a clear voice he said, "My ticker's trashed. It'll stop soon. Once it does, that's all she wrote."

"No, let's go find Miss Vera. She'll do something for you! You can't talk like that."

"Okay, okay," Crey replied, smiling again. He probably looked on Lourié like a clever little nephew. "We'll do that. But you know, something might come up anyway. I'm gonna give you something. If you survive and see D again . . . tell him this."

Crey put his right hand into his jacket, rummaged around, and then pulled out two small rectangular placards.

"One's got the name of my lady written on it . . . Never mind the other one. Have him bury 'em at the top of the mountain."

"At the top?"

"Yeah . . . Seems her home was up here a long time ago . . . Before I met her she'd gone bad in the chest, and she was dead within a year. Before she did, she told me something. Said she was a hooker in a country village now, but she'd been a plain old huntsman's daughter before. And that was when she'd been happiest."

"And?" Lourié said, eyes overflowing with tears once more.

"Tell her father . . . to plant these if he can, okay? I thought I could manage it, but that's a laugh. To someone else, I know it must seem like a stupid thing to ask . . . Just have him do it if he can. It looks like I've had it after all."

"Mister—no, you've got to hang on!" the boy cried out, clinging to the waist of the alien who'd captured him. At some point Gilzen had vanished. "Help him! My friend's dying! You could save him. Please, just do some outer-space stuff for him or something!"

The boy's words floated upward. Having hoisted Lourié into the air, the alien that served Gilzen's will put the boy under one arm and walked off down the corridor.

"Damn it, let go! Let go of me!" the boy continued to cry, his voice a mixture of anger and grief.

"Stop!" Crey groaned. "Leave . . . the kid here. Damn you, Gilzen . . . What are you gonna *use* him for?"

It wasn't on account of those words that the alien halted. Mysterious flapping white membranes were flowing toward it from up ahead. Throwing Lourié aside, the alien grabbed the beam gun from its hip and pulled the trigger. The flash from it struck the approaching object. It pierced the membrane, setting the entire thing aflame.

II

Though the alien's aim had been true, one membrane that escaped its blast skimmed the creature's left arm. What had been like a strip of cloth suddenly became a blade. It tore through the alien's armor like it was snipping a piece of string, and fresh blood gushed out—green, in this case. The alien backed away. It'd realized what the exquisite flying things really were. As the fear swelled inside it, the alien turned itself around and dashed off in the opposite direction.

Lourié ran over to Crey, then looked down to the far end of the

corridor. The flames were still burning. Reflecting that firelight, the new membranes that appeared had a reddish glow.

"What are these things?" Lourié murmured.

"A kind of monster . . . Gilzen made . . . modeled on alien DNA-mixing technology," Crey said, his voice painfully hoarse. "The DNA I got from him tells me that. These things were offshoots produced while Gilzen was trying to accomplish his aims . . . He intended to use 'em as guards or something . . . but they were too vicious to serve any purpose . . . So they all got locked up in a room underground . . . for ten thousand years . . . No, not even a year's passed since the first one was put in there. These things are immortal freaking monsters. Who's to say how many of 'em died and how many survived . . ."

"How many were there?"

". . . A lot . . . Five thousand . . . Probably all that survived were the ones that could get by without drawing energy from outside . . . Maybe ten, give or take a couple . . ."

"Ten of those flap-of-skin thingies?"

"Yep . . . Run for it."

"How did they get out?"

"How should I know? Get a move on!"

"Can you stand, mister?"

"You needn't worry . . . about little ol' me. What's more important . . . those placards I gave you . . . They're grave markers . . . I'm counting on you with those!"

Lourié gazed at the outlaw's face. It was an earnest look. Crey had probably loved those two women as well as someone like him could.

Getting up, Lourié grabbed one of Crey's arms and pulled on it.

"Don't . . . I can't move . . . So make a break for it."

A thin membrane was drawing nearer to Crey's feet.

"Go!"

Giving a violent swing of the arm the boy was holding, Crey sent Lourié reeling backward. Somehow the boy managed to keep from falling over, straightening himself up and looking over at Crey. The membrane that'd drifted over had grown rigid without warning, and it was just flowing past Crey's chest. Crey's head dropped back behind his torso.

Speechless, Lourié was rooted to the spot. Down by his feet, a white cloth-like strip drifted along. Up it floated, its edge aiming straight for the boy's neck.

"Wha—"

A stark flash of light joined the boy's backward-reeling body and the deadly membrane. Nailed to the floor by a rough wooden needle, the membrane twitched as only a living creature could, but it quickly grew still.

"D?"

From the far end of the hall a figure in black raced closer with a sword in his right hand, and the warrior woman following him also carried glittering steel. Hacking off the flapping membranes near Lourié in no time, D scooped up the boy without saying a word.

"Wait," the boy said, looking down at Crey's remains.

Normally, that was the sort of sight people shut their eyes to, but out on the Frontier you got used to seeing things like that while still in your infancy. Looking at Crey's head, Lourié thought, *He's smiling.*

His fallen torso had its right arm extended in the boy's direction. Lourié's tears overflowed. A split second before D's needle had pierced the membrane, that arm had knocked Lourié out of the way.

We're definitely going to plant these up top for you! the boy thought, his grip tightening on the little placards in his pocket.

"There's just no end to this!" Lilia cried out. At her feet was a pile of membranes she'd sliced. Now it looked like ten times as many were flying down the corridor. "What are these things?"

The boy replied to Lilia's question, "They're monsters Gilzen had locked up."

"I see. I'll get the story from you later. D—retreat!"

By the time she called out to the young man in black, he'd already advanced about fifteen feet.

"What an ego!"

She was about to go after D, and then he halted.

Up ahead, a black form flecked with shades that were difficult to describe had appeared. Without a single corner to it, it called to mind a beetle, but since it lacked limbs it apparently relied on the tank treads on its bottom half to move. Surprisingly enough, those treads weren't mechanical; they were clearly organic in nature. Perhaps it was equipped with some sort of sensory apparatus, because although no eyes were visible on it, it slowly moved what appeared to be its head from side to side, then turned toward D.

Lilia turned around and said, "It's no good. There's a ton of them coming!"

The other end of the corridor was choked with the membrane creatures. Death was closing on them from both sides.

Fear tightened its grip on Lourié's heart. He clung to D's shoulder for all he was worth. Beneath his fingers, the Hunter felt like iron. Relief and trust warmed the boy's heart. Here was a man who'd fought the Nobility and always triumphed.

D stepped forward. A sword in his right hand—that had been enough for him to carve his way through any danger.

Lourié was no longer afraid.

At that moment there was the sound of scraping stone to their left. From the depths of the stone doorway a woman poked her head out, saying, "Hurry! This way!"

"*Miss Vera?*"

Leaving Lourié's words hanging like a trail behind them, D ran toward the doorway, along with Lilia.

It was a room choked with dust. There were small windows to either side of the door. Lilia pressed her face against one.

The limbless beetle still seemed fixated on D and the rest of them. Staring at the stone wall with eyes that weren't eyes, it unexpectedly dashed forward. Compared to its earlier movements, its speed was unbelievable.

"*What* in the—" Lilia exclaimed, backing away in spite of herself, and then the door shuddered violently.

There was an unnerving sound as cracks raced through the wall.

"That's some horsepower," Lilia said with a smile. "Here it comes again."

The beetle backed up. Then the white membranes assailed it. One after another they became unholy razors, dealing white cuts to the beetle's head and body. The beetle groaned. Turning its head, it tried to drive the membranes away. The depth and numbers of the cuts only increased. After suffering countless hits in the same spot, the beetle disgorged what could only be described as grayish "blood" from its wounds, and then every inch of it turned boiling hot.

Once again Lilia pulled her face back from the window, and an intense heat spread through the room.

"Into the next room!" Vera shouted.

D pushed Lourié and Vera into the room, then shut the door. He probably didn't throw Lilia in with them because she was a Huntress.

"It's incredible!" Lilia remarked with excitement.

Every last one of the advancing membranes was enveloped by flames, reduced to ash before they fell to the floor. Every inch of the beetle was still burning hot, and the melting walls and ceiling around it began to collapse.

D and Lilia moved into the other room, too. Vera and Lourié were already lying limply on the floor. That was on account of the heat that filled the room.

"If this keeps up, those two are goners. Not that it's a big deal or anything," Lilia asserted unpleasantly. She'd been a callous woman from the start, and after being bitten by Gilzen that trait only seemed to have been amplified.

Another wall collapsed. They were less than eighteen inches from the feverish hell.

"What do you intend to do, D?"

As Lilia made that mocking query, D stepped forward. Lilia could see how his eyes gleamed wildly.

"You—you don't mean to . . . ?"

For a few seconds astonishment prevented the Huntress from making

any movement at all. D pulled the paralyzed Lilia close. She planted one hand against the black fabric of his chest to push him away, but there she was stopped. Both physically and mentally. Oh, the look on D's face as he sank his fangs into her carotid artery! He had chosen to transform into a vampire. A second passed, and then another—and as D quietly pulled away, Lilia simultaneously collapsed on the spot. There was something both disturbing and sensual in the way D wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Was that enough?" he asked.

"More or less," the hoarse voice replied. A small face was rising in the palm of D's left hand.

Another wall collapsed. The heat assailed them like a wild beast.

"So hot," Lourié muttered fuzzily.

As if in response to that, D raised his left hand. From the little lips protruding from it something spurted. Fresh blood.

The stream of blood eddied, forming layer upon layer, turning into crimson steam where it came in contact with the heat. It became a wall of red liquid that stood against temperatures high enough to melt away even stone. It was obviously Lilia's blood. However, there was no way the small amount of blood taken from her should be able to counter the waves of heat that were ravaging this floor of the castle. Perhaps it was something in the nature of the blood, or maybe there was some magical power behind the way it'd been spit out, but when the blood turned to steam it seemed to multiply without end, becoming a bloody vortex that mesmerized the room, the world, the very heat—until at last the heat was gone.

An ineffable stench of blood hung in the room, and D didn't so much as glance back at the boy or the doctor by the wall as he asked them, "Are you okay?"

With unexpected speed the exhausted Vera responded, "I'm fine. The child's fine, too."

As Lourié lay there, the doctor had taken his pulse and checked his pupils.

D had already stepped out into the corridor. The rooms along either side of it were all burnt out. There was no sign of the beetle or the living membranes. Had the battle ended with the beetle victorious? No, on the floor were about a dozen whitish lines, long and trailing like loose threads. They were marks left where the beetle had bled. The membrane creatures had made manifest their terrible cutting ability.

"So, they took each other out?"

No one replied to the left hand's question.

"My thoughts on the matter are that those were some of the creatures locked in that underground vault and putting out that supernatural aura. Their prison must've selectively taken part of the shock from that blast in the laboratory, breaking it open. Which would

mean the rest of 'em have escaped, too. Sheesh! We've got Gilzen's servants and the aliens—plus monsters? This castle's turning into all sorts of hell! You'd better get those two out of here fast. Even though they know your true nature now."

At that point the left hand made a garbled cry. D had balled it into a tight fist. He squeezed it harder and more cruelly than ever.

III

The first thing D did was tell Vera and Lourié to hide. At that point there was an unexpected development. Vera—the brave doctor—started crying in fear.

"No, I don't want to be left here with the child!" she cried. "What are we supposed to do if the monsters come? Can you take responsibility for that?"

"Wow," the Hunter's left hand groaned. "That's how the cookie crumbled? A physical and mental shift brought on by external pressure —just perfect!"

Even Lourié couldn't help but ask, "Dr. Vera, what's wrong?"

"Shut up. Just stay out of this. My life is at stake!" Vera cried, even raising her hand as if to slap the boy.

"What are you going to do?" the dumbfounded Lilia whispered to D. She hadn't yet exhibited any of the effects of being bitten by him. It was just as it'd been when Gilzen bit her. "If she keeps crying and screaming like that, she's gonna dig her own grave. The kid's in danger, too," she added. "Of course, you know full well if we bring them along they'll only get in our way."

Lilia licked her lips. In a low, dark, passionate tone she continued, "How about we kill them?"

Looking her straight in the face, D said, "You're hungry, aren't you?"

It wasn't a question. It was merely an observation. However, Lilia's expression changed.

"Who'd ever—not for *her* blood," the Huntress spat with naked loathing, but she quickly got a look in her eyes that was beyond description as she stared at D. It was a feverish gaze. "Funny, isn't it? When Gilzen bit me it was no big deal, but I look at you, and it makes me all warm south of the border. You know, D, you're the one who did this to me. Sure you don't want to *take responsibility*?"

Her words could've been interpreted in several very different ways, but of course there was no reply. This was no time for worrying about such things.

After a short pause, D told her, "You're staying here, too."

Lilia bugged her eyes, sputtering, “I’m—*why*?”

“Hide somewhere and wait for me to come back.”

“I think just doing away with them would be faster. After all, it’s not like bringing them back was part of the contract.” At that point Lilia noticed how D was looking at her. “Stop it!” she cried. “You’re giving me the creeps. Fine. I’ll look after these two. Now, hurry back. One more thing—are you sure you can find Gilzen without me?”

“We’ll manage somehow,” the hoarse voice replied with distaste.

Ignoring it, Lilia got closer to D, grabbed his hand, and gave it a small but intense shake. “You’d better come back.” It was unclear whether or not D noticed her words weren’t prompted by concern for his safety. “We’ll be hiding out somewhere on this floor,” she continued. “Give a shout if you make it back.”

“There are three types of enemy here. Be careful,” D said.

Gilzen and those loyal to him, the aliens, and now the monsters the Noble had created—that made three threats. Regardless of the fact that Lilia had received the kiss of the Nobility, those weren’t the kind of foes she could easily best.

Once the Hunter had stepped out into the corridor, his left hand asked, “Okay, where are we going?”

“The energy core,” D said without missing a beat.

“Oh! That’s a good plan. Threaten to destroy the whole castle and he’ll have no choice but to show himself. And we know where the reactor is. But on the way there, the place is liable to be crawling with monsters. Can’t say for sure none of them aren’t tough enough to slay you.”

Before its sarcastic remark was finished, the Hunter said, “Where is it?”

“Thataway.”

D started walking. No matter what form of terrors this insane world might have waiting for him out there, they would never stop this gorgeous young man from pressing forward.

The stony moving sidewalk was going down a steep incline. An hour had passed since the Hunter had entrusted the others to Lilia’s care.

“Sheesh,” the hoarse voice croaked, “you’ve done well to make it this far. You’ve really hacked your way through those hellish guardians. Today you’ve really got me thinking you’re a monster!”

The voice sounded rather reflective, but there was no response from D. A ghastly sight, he kept his silence.

His right shoulder had been split open by the lightning-quick assault

of a spiked tail, leaving his upper body soaked in blood. His left cheek bore a shallow cut the flesh was rising to fill, but initially it'd been deep enough to expose his cheekbone. That wound had been dealt by one of the meatball-shaped carnivores that'd flown at him by the hundreds. His left hand had been taken off twice, and was now finally reattaching itself. Just to get this far he must've slain more than fifty monsters. Yet the young man was exquisite. Stained with darkness and blood, his pale skin glowing all the more, his stunning good looks were such they might even be described as hellishly beautiful, and it seemed like they would drive the world mad. And everyone who looked upon his face felt the same thing: *I don't mind if he kills me.* It wasn't a thought. That faculty quickly melted away, and wouldn't return for a while. Every foe of his was enraptured. Being slain in such a state, they probably all died happy.

D stepped off onto the stone pathway. A stone doorway towered before him. It was massive in comparison to all the doors he'd seen up to this point, and an overwhelming force filled the stonework. It was terribly quiet.

"Security's gonna be brutal," the hoarse voice warned him.

D had already started forward. Whatever awaited him, it didn't matter to this young man.

"You need a key to open the lock," the hoarse voice said, sounding composed, considering the context. It must've been used to situations like this.

D pressed his left hand against the stone doorway. At the same time, the door behind him began to open.

"Wow, it actually opened?" the left hand cried out, and D lowered it, watching the receding door and the slowly widening rectangle. "This is a trap! Gilzen set it up because he guessed we'd come here. Hey, you still planning on going *in*?"

That could be called a dumb question.

Not waiting until it was sufficiently wide to pass through, D twisted his body to squeeze through the doorway.

"Oh, my!"

That remark escaped the Hunter's left hand on seeing the armed soldiers in the space just beyond the door. Equipped with long spears, longbows, rifles, flamethrowers, and even laser guns, the soldiers numbered over a hundred. These were the troops who guarded the energy core.

"Just as I thought," the hoarse voice said, a sigh mixing with its words. Yet why did its tone also carry confidence and bold laughter?

The soldiers arrayed there already had eyes glowing red with madness, and a colorless and invisible but nonetheless incredibly powerful air of the supernatural rose from them. At the fore stood a row of ten soldiers armed with laser guns.

"Take aim!" ordered the apparent leader, standing at the right end of the row. Without a second to lose, he continued, "Fire!"

It didn't seem likely even D could survive being shot through the heart by a ten-thousand-degree heat ray. However—no deadly beams were fired.

As the shaken soldiers broke their line, a black gale rushed at them. Silvery gleams flashed out and blood spurted horribly while the blue light was witness to the chaos of life and death. Those who discarded their laser guns and tried to run away had their backs slashed open, while those who tried to shield themselves with the guns were cut in two, along with their weapons. The Vampire Hunter D—baring your teeth at him was a knock at death's door.

"Don't get near him. Encircle him and hit him with the arrows!" shouted the leader, whose face was then split down the middle.

The bowmen receded like an outgoing tide. Before they could stop, the black gale blew at them, dropping them in a storm of blood. D's blade didn't deal shallow wounds. It was as if the Grim Reaper had whispered to him that making them suffer would be a sin, and the soldiers who fought in their retreat joined the bloody festivities through their instantaneous deaths.

Long spears thrust at the Hunter from all four sides. Hoping to deal the final blow to the impaled Hunter, the group with longswords made a ring and waited for their chance. Before they realized it was merely an afterimage the spears had pierced, the spearmen were on the receiving end of the murderous intent from the beauty in black sailing down from above.

By the time a hundred soldiers had been reduced to half that number, their fear was so high many of them tried to flee. Some were pierced through the heart by rough wooden needles, and some reached the exit at the far end of the room. Thudding into an invisible barrier, they fell on the spot with hands up to their faces, and still more needles assailed them. The existence of that barrier filled the soldiers with despair and rebellion. They counterattacked with looks of insanity on their faces, but they were quickly cut down and reduced to dust.

Not even breathing hard, D had just lowered his sword when a heavy laugh rained down on him from above. D looked up.

Gilzen stood atop the canopy that covered a walkway that ran to the far end of the room.

"The expression 'no blood or tears' describes you quite well, doesn't it? In order to talk with me, you cut down a hundred men without getting winded? Well, that's fine. Fighting is their job. They must realize that losing means dying. So—on to the next part."

"The next part?" the hoarse voice said, furrowing its brow.

D felt the space on all sides of him suddenly grow tighter.

"Shrinking down your force field?" the hoarse voice asked, and for

some reason there was laughter in its tone.

"It's a gravity field, to be precise," Gilzen said. "And I shall squeeze you down until you're small enough to fit through a hole in the Dirac Sea. I wonder how a false immortal will react when he has infinite negative mass in an infinitely small volume."

It was said that unless a vampire had a stake driven through their heart or their head cut off, they would continue to live. Numerous examples attested to this. Even now scholars in the Capital pondered the destruction of vampires. *Are there any other ways to do it?* they wondered. Drowning, burning, bullets, being run over, asphyxiation, sudden impact, blood loss, etc., etc.—they scoured the written records, oral traditions, and firsthand accounts from Frontier villages, laboriously cataloging the roughly thirty thousand examples that they divided into the aforementioned classes in *Deaths of the Nobility*, in which the author Derek Cerceau had this to say: "The sole manner of death for which we have no records at all is death by pressure. Nobles take great pride in their unchanging elegance and youth, but if one were to be locked in a square chamber and pressure were applied from all sides until flesh and bone were fused together, would the Noble still be able to return to normal? I am extremely curious and excited about the prospect of witnessing such an experiment."

Now, walls of electrons pressed against every inch of D, resulting in an unpleasant sound of creaking bones in a place so sealed off no one would hear it.

The Towering Foe

chapter 6

I

Lilia holed up with the doctor and the boy in an empty room on that same floor. Once the iron door was shut, there was no need to fear discovery.

"We'll wait here for D," the Huntress told them. "No matter what happens, you've got to keep a grip on yourself. You can't start screaming."

Though the two nodded, Vera was utterly terrified, while Lourié's eyes had a definite gleam of resistance to authority. The boy couldn't allow himself to just be swept along by fate. However, he said nothing, merely lying down at one end of the room. He was well aware that selfish actions on his part could expose his compatriots to danger.

An hour passed, and then that stretched into two. A number of times the footfalls of what were apparently guards or signs of some unknown life forms could be heard passing beyond the door, but they seemed to take no notice of the room's inhabitants.

"Oh, now here's something," Lilia remarked with interest. "It sounds like some guards and monsters just ran into each other. They were wiped out in nothing flat. The guards, that is. The castle's really out of control, eh? The way things are going, I'm not sure how much longer we'll be able to stay here. Ordinarily, the guards wouldn't leave a stone unturned looking for us, so the freaking monsters are buying us some time, I suppose."

"But what'll we do, supposing Mr. D doesn't come back?" Lourié asked.

"We'll have no choice but to do something on our own," she replied handily, giving him a smile.

Lourié made a face that said he didn't trust her in the least, pressing the matter as he said, "You said *we*, but you ran off on your own before, didn't you?"

"I know, I know," Lilia replied, and all she could do was grin wryly. "But you needn't worry. As you can see, I'm smitten with the man in black."

"What?"

As the boy's mouth dropped open, she gave him a real smile, adding, "At any rate, let's just wait."

"How long are we going to stay here?" asked a completely unexpected voice that rose from a corner of the room.

Lilia made a face that seemed to say, *Here we go again*, as she replied, "As I was just saying, for the time being we wait until D gets back."

"And if he doesn't come back?"

"Don't ask me the same thing the kid just did. We'll have no choice but to do something on our own, right?"

"Before, you went off by your—"

"Oh, I've had it with you two!" Lilia exclaimed, throwing up her hands and making a pushing gesture with them. "How long are you going to hold that against me? Look at this!" she said, suddenly grabbing hold of her white scarf and tugging it down.

Unmistakable teeth marks remained over her carotid artery.

"Four . . ." Lourié murmured like a groan. Fear blanched the brave boy's expression.

A finger adorned with red nail polish pointed to her pale throat. "The top two were Gilzen." The finger dropped. "This right here is a hickey from the guy you have total and complete faith in. Ordinarily, I'd be a victim under the thrall of two Nobles."

Lilia's lips twisted. She'd smiled. Her teeth came into view.

"Noooo," Vera cried, plastering herself back against the wall. Lourié diverted his gaze.

"They're just like a Noble's fangs. But don't worry. I'm a special kind of victim, and I didn't end up under their control. If I weren't, I'd have long since fought D, or else attacked the two of you."

Neither of them said a word.

"Though, come to think of it, I am a little *thirsty*." Seeing how the two of them turned to ice, the Huntress grinned again, saying, "I'm joking! But if you don't do as I say—"

Suddenly, Vera stood up. Partly it was because the doctor was so frightened she couldn't stand it any longer, but Lilia had also let her guard down. Slipping past the hand that reached out for her, Vera dashed over to the iron door.

"Stupid doctor!" Lilia snarled, grabbing her by the shoulder and yanking her back. She delivered a slap to the woman that knocked her against the floor.

The Huntress turned toward the door. It was open about two inches. Lilia couldn't move her limbs.

Have to shut it. Got to move forward. Straight ahead.

Ah, her hand moved. Her feet stepped forward, too. Her fingertips brushed the door.

The door began to move. Swinging *inward*. Beyond the gradually widening gap a green figure came into view. Lilia knew there was no use shutting it now.

"Back up—to the far end of the room," she said to the two behind

her, backing away a good distance herself as she drew her longsword.

In the meantime, the intruder entered the room. It was a man, and his hair, his cape, his clothes—hell, even his hands and face—were green. Just to keep everything nice and tidy, his eyeballs were the same hue.

"You're not a guard, I take it?" Lilia said, and as she glared at the man she double-checked her grip on her longsword. "What's your name? I'm Lilia. I'm a Huntress."

"I'm Zoltan. I work as a duelist."

"Well—I'm surprised to find you so far from the city, then."

What Lilia meant was that it wasn't the sort of job you could make enough to live on out in the boondocks. He wasn't a warrior. In a manner of speaking, duelists were stand-ins. Their job was to fight in place of an employer when that person was forced to take part in a duel. Since they made no distinction in the age or sex of their employers, they might have to take part in a duel between students, and the results of said encounters often led to their being called murderers, though they could be charged with no crime. However, since the types of weapons were chosen by their employer, it might be knives, swords, firearms—or in an extreme example, they might even have to substitute in a battle between two monsters. A duelist couldn't afford to have definite strengths and weaknesses. Since the demand for duelists was in proportion to the population, the overwhelming majority of them could be found in the Capital or in cities in the various districts. You'd never expect to find one out on the Frontier, in a Noble's castle.

"Are you a servant of Gilzen?"

"Who's that?" he asked, his green eyes hazily reflecting Lilia. "Two days ago, I was in a bar in the Capital. I don't recall ordering a particularly strong drink, yet all of a sudden I got drowsy, and the next thing I knew I was sleeping in a bed here. What is this place? Do you know the way out? No, never mind. For some reason, ever since I woke up I've been wanting to cut into someone so bad I can hardly stand it. Throw down with me."

For this man, it'd seemed like two days—but had he in fact been abducted and kept asleep by the aliens' powers for ten thousand years?

"Sure thing!"

Lilia's limbs flew into action. Her opponent hadn't drawn the sword from his hip, but anyone who would've considered what she did unsportsmanlike didn't know Hunters. Duelists had rules, but the same couldn't be said of Hunters who were merely in it for the money. It wasn't people fighting for honor they faced, but bloodthirsty Nobles or monsters.

Her blade made a diagonal slash right for the base of Zoltan's neck, but it was stopped without a sound. Zoltan gripped it in his left fist. The Huntress tried to pull it back, but it wouldn't budge.

What the hell? she thought. Leaping back some ten feet, she believed she'd narrowly avoided the slashing blade that would've scythed through her torso, but the solar plexus region of her armor was rent and fresh blood seeped from her.

"You're not bad," Lilia said with a daring grin, her hands no longer holding a sword.

"Die!" Zoltan cried, making a crude thrust.

With a low groan of pain, Lilia slumped forward. The blade of the sword pierced the right side of her chest, with its tip protruding from her back. Lilia's body pushed forward. Practically pulling herself along the sword, she got right up in front of Zoltan before her right hand slashed through his neck. The twelve-inch blade in the palm of her hand had obviously been secreted in the upper-arm piece of her armor.

The duelist's head flopped backward.

"Miss . . . Lilia . . ."

Turning her face ever so slightly to the absent-mindedly murmuring Lourié, the Huntress gave him a wink. Having received the kiss of the Nobility, the woman had inherited the indestructible nature of a Noble.

When Lilia tried to extract the blade that was stuck through her, Zoltan moved. His right hand thrust the longsword back and forth as if to carve a hole in her, and Lilia convulsed. From behind the decapitated Zoltan the duelist's head was slowly lifted. The duelist, too, had been a test subject for Gilzen's exploration of the possibilities posed by aliens and Nobles. What seemed to be hundreds of green tendon-like organs were reconnecting the head to the torso.

"I'm not bleeding a hell of a lot, and what does come out is green," Zoltan said, touching his fingers to the wound and staring down at his fingertips. "Seems that while I was asleep, I was transformed into some sort of plant. What the hell is going on?"

"Maybe they meant to say, 'Be a pickle for me'?" Lilia said, her right arm coming down. The blade that pierced her was shattered, and she dropped to her knees on the spot. A bloodstained sword bit into her shoulder. Lilia's scream of pain was enough to drown out Vera's cries.

Changing his stance, Zoltan raised his longsword for another blow. From the angle of the blade and the way he stood, he'd be aiming for her neck. But at that instant his grinning green eyes caught a figure colliding with his right flank. The dull impact didn't cause the duelist much pain, and it would be safe to say that may have saved Lourié's life. Shifting his sword to his left hand, Zoltan used his right to knock the boy away. Returning the weapon to his right hand, he swung it down—but his abdomen split horizontally.

The Huntress got up in front of the reeling Zoltan. When Lourié was sent flying ten feet, the battle had become a defensive action. However, instead of launching a second attack, Lilia brought her right wrist up to her mouth.

Zoltan needed only a few seconds to recover, and when he raised his sword high, burning with renewed malice, his face became stained with red.

"My blood," Lilia whispered, lowering the wrist she'd just bitten open. Her lips glistened with her own blood, which she'd just sprayed at Zoltan, and stark fangs peeked alluringly from between them.

The situation had worked an impossible change on the duelist. The murderous intent had vanished from his eyes, and he'd begun licking at the blood that dripped down his face.

"After sleeping for two days—or ten thousand years—you must be really thirsty, eh, veggie swordsman?" Lilia sneered, her breathing still ragged. "As soon as you saw my blood, the look in your eyes changed. Drink it slowly. Until it returns you to normal."

It was Lilia's blade that was swung home. It split the green duelist in two from head to crotch. His body thudded to the floor, but soon the thread-like vegetable fibers that'd begun to grow from either side of the slice were connecting to each other.

"His heart should've been cut in half, too! There's nothing I can do," Lilia told the boy and Vera. "We'll run for it! Hurry up and get on your feet."

"Where do you plan on going?" Vera asked, her voice rising nearly to a scream.

"I don't know. But we can't stay here any longer. You want me to keep fighting that goon forever?"

"Get him outside, then. I don't want to go anywhere else."

The doctor's attitude had done a complete about-face, and Lilia gazed at her with extreme sternness before suddenly stepping forward.

"Stop it. You can't kill her!" Lourié cried, trying to shield the doctor.

Pushing past the boy, the Huntress said, "Don't worry."

Suddenly she delivered a sharp kick to the doctor's jaw that knocked her out, then threw the woman over her shoulder before standing up straight again. Without warning, the Huntress groaned and staggered. Even though she'd gained the regenerative powers of a Noble, the pain of the wounds she'd just received was still fresh.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll manage. Just hurts a little, that's all."

"I'll help carry her, too."

That offer caused Lilia to roar with laughter. "Funny, you didn't look like a comedian to me. By the way, the punch you got in on that guy's flank—that really did the trick. You self-taught?"

Though he flushed, Lourié nodded. "I got teased a lot, so a warrior who came to our house once showed me how to fight."

"That was a pretty good punch."

Lourié didn't know what to say. Lilia had done something he couldn't believe: she'd rubbed the top of the boy's head.

Just as her hand was about to touch him, Lourié had backed away reflexively, but he immediately got an apologetic look on his face.

"Sorry."

Lilia made a fist and pantomimed belting him. "You're an open book, aren't you. We're even now."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Okay, let's get going. Freak!" the Huntress exclaimed, kicking the right half of the duelist's body into the corner of the room while it still attempted to reattach itself to its mate. She then headed for the door. Checking that there was no one in the corridor, she stepped outside. They had no destination. They were completely aimless.

Lilia brought up the rear, and when they'd gone about twenty yards, Lourié felt an incredible force tighten around his torso. *Above me?* he thought, and at that very instant he was pulled up with terrific speed, disappearing into the depths of the ceiling.

II

Lourié had been caught by a creature's tentacle. It lurked in a dance hall some five floors above the one Lourié was on, sending hundreds of its tentacles creeping throughout the castle in search of prey. It was one of the creatures that'd escaped from containment. Most of its tentacles had been discovered by the guards and lopped off, rendering them useless, but those that remained were busy snatching up castle guards and other monsters and delivering them to its writhing body a mile and a quarter away. The tentacle covered that distance in five seconds. The speed was so great Lourié blacked out, and the next thing he knew, he could make out something down below—a squirming ocher mass fifteen to twenty feet beneath him that covered half the floor of the dance hall with its body and tentacles. Its body split open in the shape of a cross, exposing a crimson maw. He was being dragged toward it!

The boy heard the flapping of wings overhead. Two brick-colored winged creatures nose-dived right past Lourié. Just before they pulled up, they released a yellowish fluid on the monster on the floor. Judging from the scent that assailed his nose, it must've been urine.

The cruciform mouth swallowed it. The titanic beast twisted its body. Its tentacles flailed in unison, looking like the approach of great, crushing waves. Those waves were then disrupted, lashing madly, twisting together to form bizarre patterns. One tentacle landed a blind strike on one of the flying creatures. It vanished into the beast's trembling maw.

Lourié suddenly felt himself being released. The problem was, he was

falling headfirst. He landed on something soft. A scream filled his mouth. He was on top of the monster. All around him was a wall of squirming tentacles. There was no gap in it.

At that very moment, the wall rose en masse in one direction. The flying creature had returned. It released its deadly urine.

The boy spotted a gap in the tentacles he thought he could manage to slip through. The flying creature dove straight for him. Beneath it, white smoke rose. If it sprayed him, he'd melt right down to his bones.

Lourié ran. Beneath his feet, the beast felt like a wineskin full of liquid. He jumped. Tentacles brushed his face and hands. A chill a thousand times worse than he'd get from seeing a snake shot through his body. His feet froze.

"No!" he shouted, running. In shouting, he seemed to forget the chill.

He was through! Beyond the wriggling mire he could make out the floor of the hall and a small door. That's where he'd go. His way out.

Hope bubbled up within him. Lourié started to run. Pounding across the hard floor, he had to reach that door.

Will I make it? Lourié thought.

The Nobleman bugged his eyes. A gravity field powerful enough to crush D down to atoms had suddenly disappeared. Leaning out from the observation tower, Gilzen stared down at D, who was also looking up at him.

"My, that barrier was made with the aliens' knowledge. I'm surprised you could—"

"Old. That stuff is old hat," D's left hand jeered from the vicinity of the Hunter's hip, having just come away from the barrier. "That thing was using ten-thousand-year-old technology, but we've had all that time to evolve. Ol' Gilzen might be a stupider foe than we thought!"

D quickly bent down and grabbed a spear that lay by his feet. The corpses of soldiers littered the floor.

"Can you catch this, Gilzen?"

The Hunter didn't plant his feet or even twist at the waist, he merely stood straight and hurled the weapon with the motion of his right arm alone.

Easily catching it one handed, Gilzen let out a gasp of astonishment. The palm of the hand that'd caught the spear was covered with blood. His skin had split open.

"You've improved since our first encounter," Gilzen commented with delight. "So, shall we face off after our discussion? Don't be surprised. That is what I agreed to!"

"That was more of your babbling," D said softly. "Should I come up after you, or will you come down here?"

"Don't be so hasty. First, have a look at this."

Gilzen reached his left hand into the tower and grabbed something. That *something* turned out to be the boy Lourié, trussed up with a slender rope.

"Captured already?" the hoarse voice said with disgust.

"I caught him just a short while ago in a dance hall not currently in use in the castle. He's possessed of remarkably good fortune, having fled from the thousand-armed one when it tried to eat him. D, would you now see him forfeit that life here?"

"I told you before. He's nothing to me."

"Cease your cold-blooded posturing. Your blood may be cold, but it's not frozen solid. As evidence of that—look!"

Gilzen took the scepter in his right hand and touched it to the boy's right shoulder. Though it only appeared to press against Lourié lightly, his arm burst right out of the socket. Letting out a scream that didn't even seem human, the boy fainted.

"What are you doing?" the hoarse voice cried out. "Stop it. Stop it right now. You call yourself a Noble, you *bastard*?"

Gilzen responded with mocking laughter. It was the sort of bold laugh where it seemed you'd be able to see right down his throat, and it still echoed while he unveiled his next hellish tableau. Raising his scepter, Gilzen smashed the boy's limbs, ripped them off, and then for the coup de grâce, made a vertical swipe that cut him in two before the Nobleman threw him to the ground. Each terrifying act had wrung a scream from the half-dead Lourié, and the instant he was dashed against the stone floor he let out a single low moan and moved no more.

"What's wrong, D? Don't tell me you've fallen into despair. There's still something I would have you do, in order to accomplish the desires of the great Gilzen. Come. I'll be waiting farther in."

The duke's golden cape whipped in the wind as he vanished, and then D walked forward. He didn't even glance at the brutalized corpse. But as they passed by it, the hoarse voice said, "Oh, what's this?" as if its eyes had gone wide. It'd noticed that the dismembered body and all that blood weren't real.

"Dear me, that was so realistic it had me fooled. For an organic automaton, it was really well done. Yessiree."

"You just don't know when to give up."

With that one remark, D squeezed his hand into a fist. A small scream rang out.

The golden cape fluttered at the far end of the pathway.

"So, you've come, D? You're probably rather intent on slaying me, but you should wait here a moment. Once you've seen what the Sacred Ancestor saw, then you can decide what to do."

A ghastly aura already churned from every inch of D, but now he let the power drain from him.

The two of them walked side by side. Advancing about fifty yards down a gentle incline, they came to a point where an enormous iron door blocked their progress. Fresh soldiers were lined up in front of it.

"That's the same number of soldiers, armed with the same weapons as when you fought them. Watch and see how I fight." Gilzen bared his teeth. "Even the Nobility, so proud of their ageless and undying nature, are destroyed when they're run through the heart. That's no different for the Sacred Ancestor or any other Noble—or for you."

Nothing from the Hunter.

"However, I wouldn't call that true immortality. That was the first thing I set out to correct. You'll want to watch this."

Still walking forward, Gilzen nodded.

There was the sound of iron bowstrings slicing the air in unison, the noise becoming ten arrows centered on Gilzen's throat and heart.

His neck torn halfway through by the force and weight of the arrows, the Nobleman turned to D and bared his fangs. Using both hands to grab the arrows stuck in his throat and chest, Gilzen pulled them all out at once.

"So, true immortality has been accomplished. What's next?"

His smile deepened. It was directed at the bowmen. His subordinates were still frozen in the pose of firing their bows as his gigantic form leapt into their midst. The duke's scepter flashed out, and his cape danced on the air like the wings of a mystic bird. In five seconds flat the ten bowmen lay on the ground. Not one of them still had a head.

"Did he really need to kill 'em?" the hoarse voice sighed with grief.

Perhaps those words reached the duke's ears.

"Whether it was on my orders or not, I can't allow anyone who attempts to take my life to go unpunished," Gilzen said, his reply tinged with laughter.

D said nothing. There were still more soldiers.

"What are you doing? Slay me. I believe I made it clear to you earlier that if you don't, naught but death awaits you!"

The faces of the soldiers took on a hue of death. They failed to move not due to any wish to disobey Gilzen's commands, but because of the air of malice that gushed from his massive form.

"Oh, you lousy weaklings!" Gilzen shouted, charging forward. A flashing swipe of his scepter felled several decapitated riflemen.

Finally returning to their senses, the soldiers readied swords and firearms and launched a counterattack. Gilzen's body was pierced in countless spots by crimson beams and silvery sword blades. His heart was run through with a long spear, while the soldiers' other spears nearly took his head off.

The conflict was finished in less than a minute. Although the soldiers were battling for their very lives, it was unclear if the same could be said of Gilzen. Glaring at the soldiers swiftly decomposing and turning to dust, their lord was stuck full of arrows and spears, and his clothing and armor still smoked and burned from a shower of laser blasts. All the fingers of his left hand save the thumb had been taken off, and an iron arrow was still embedded deep in his right eye.

"This is just like—the Standing Death of Benkei," the hoarse voice murmured.

However, this Benkei was obviously still breathing. The slices around his neck were now just thin red lines. The places that'd been charred by lasers were swelling—and one could hear the hard rattle of arrows and spears falling against the floor as the Nobleman's flesh pushed them back out. His hand reached for the arrow in his right eye and extracted it. The bloody cavern of a socket he'd been left with was now occupied by a perfectly formed eyeball. It reflected the young man in black.

"How about that, D? Do you think you can best me?" And then the duke grinned.

There wasn't a single mark anywhere on his body. He was a demon of a man, surpassing even D in his indestructibility.

"You may attack me now if you like, but first I'd like you to see something else. The fruits of my labors, so to speak. Fortunately, they make their home near the reactor."

Gilzen went over to the iron door and gave it a push. It opened slowly but without any resistance, and then the Nobleman went inside. D followed after him.

The air was hot.

"Well, reactor or not, this is beyond the norm. Don't tell me it's overloading or—no, hold on."

In response to the dubious tones of the hoarse voice, Gilzen replied, "You'll see soon enough. Never mind that, be careful."

The interior was shrouded in darkness. It seemed an unimaginably careless state for the most important area of the castle. D had already noticed the air of malice that filled the darkness.

There were a dozen of them—one of which charged them from the right. It was a swordsman clad in rags discernible even in the gloom, but what was the cause of his killing lust?

"Gilzen!" the foe bellowed as he made a slash.

Easily avoiding it, the lord of the castle pointed to D, saying, "This is my most esteemed colleague."

His foe glared at D. Cloudy and bloodshot, his eyes had a look of madness. His hair and beard were chaotically overgrown, and on that filth-encrusted face the lips alone were beautifully red.

"You're his damned colleague?"

D didn't reply to that voice, which seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth. The fangs that peeked from between his foe's lips were proof that this was a Noble. Not that the young man was the kind of person to spare someone who bared their teeth at him just because they were human.

His foe kicked off the ground, and the instant he passed the Hunter, the attacker's body split in two. Blood and entrails splashed across the stone floor, while D's blade reversed course and aimed for the Noble's heart.

"Wait!" a voice called to the Hunter from the depths of the darkness. What halted D's sword was the ring of seriousness that voice carried.

The source of the voice was one of the enraged—and D could make out a figure who was, not surprisingly, covered in rags from head to toe. Another piece of cloth covered his head, leaving his eyes alone exposed.

"It wasn't you we were after. It was that man, Gilzen. Though we were at fault for attacking, please don't deal him the final blow."

"Is that the voice of Bengus, captain of the guard? I'm surprised you're still alive," Gilzen laughed. It was an outright sneer.

"Gillespie, Hakolo, and Baichung are all here as well. My lord, all the victims of your cruel amusements have survived all this time on hatred and resentment alone," said a vengeful voice that seemed to burn with shadowy fires.

"That is good to hear. It is the special privilege of the Nobility to enjoy life eternal! I take it you are comfortable in the bodies I gave you?"

The air shook. The anger, grief, and hatred of those who'd been cast away in the darkness flowed like waves through the pitch blackness.

"Sheesh, I don't even—"

It was unclear what D made of the words his left hand let slip out.

The figures who lurked in the darkness had all once been known as Nobles, as was plain by their features and the clothes they wore. Ageless and undying—a cruel fate for those who'd been altered like this. Not one of them was entirely intact. One had viscous, waxy fluid dripping from their skin, while another had arms and legs covered with scales like a reptile. There was one who, lacking a lower half, scrambled closer on claws that scratched against the stone floor. Whistling past D was a whip—no, it was a long, long tongue belonging to a woman. Was that chattering down by his feet the sound of gnashing teeth? The source of the sound was a second mouth snaking back to a man lying down a good thirty feet away.

"So good of you to come . . . And good of you to bring him," said an

old man's voice. "I was . . . Duke Gilzen's steward. I served him to the very last drop of blood in my veins . . . and this was my reward. After we were sealed away in this hole, we waited. Oh, how we awaited your visit, my lord . . . Now, if you would be so good as to let us evince our hatred."

And how did Gilzen react to that appeal of bloody malice that seemed wrung from their very entrails? He laughed. There in the blackness, he reared back and bellowed with laughter.

"You worthless fools can't comprehend the meaning of greatness. Your bodies were sacrificed toward the shining future of the Nobility. What's more, as compensation for the forms you've taken, I believe you also received powers no ordinary Noble would possess. You hate me? Hatred? Give thanks! Thank me!"

The hoarse voice groaned with surprise.

A terrible killing lust had changed the composition of the air. A killing lust? No, it was an air of anger. The feelings of those who'd lived for hate and hate alone at being told not to be spiteful but rather to be thankful put a bitter grin on Gilzen's lips.

"Filthy ingrates. It would seem you're hell bent on turning your fangs against me. I shall grant your wish. Let our gorgeous guest see your powers in all their glory. D, you're not to interfere in this."

"No, you must not!" the steward cried out. "This is the opportunity for us to demonstrate our hatred. Any interference is unnecessary."

D only said one thing: "You can't win."

"We know that," the steward replied. His tone was cheerful. "All of us have known that from the start. Though we may not be able to so much as scratch him, we can raise our hands against Duke Gilzen—that in itself is enough to put a smile on our faces as we mount the road to our destruction. Our hatred might not be served, but allow us this."

"Understood."

"You have my thanks. And we are ready, my lord!"

"Oh, come then. You fools. Curse the fate you yourselves have chosen."

D watched the entire scene that played out a second later. How a mouth full of fangs biting at Gilzen's throat was effortlessly ripped apart. How the woman's tongue that wrapped around Gilzen's neck was torn out at the base. How the steward sailed at the Nobleman, only to have his heart pierced by a single thrust of the duke's scepter. The steward had said they might not be able to so much as scratch him. That was the truth. One after another the remaining compatriots were slain, and before they had time to even scratch the duke, the dwellers in darkness had been exterminated.

Thumping his chest, Gilzen laughed.

"Did you see that, D? I don't mean how they died, but their powers. Those were given to them by the alien technology. Do you understand,

D? That's precisely the kind of potential I was aiming for in the Nobility. Do you not think it far more realistic than the Sacred Ancestor seeking the same by mixing our blood with that of the lowly humans?"

"You should've tried asking them."

"Ask them? What are you saying? I make *declarations*! I tell them to take pride in their fates. That their bodies have been given over to the future of the Nobility."

"Are you satisfied now?"

D's words cut Gilzen's monologue short. Looking at the Hunter's face with surprise, he said, "So that's it? You really are that sort of man, aren't you? One look at the Sacred Ancestor would tell me that. I have but one remaining desire. D, I want your blood."

Gilzen extended one hand. It was trembling.

"I rank myself as a perfect being. However, to be honest, I find it difficult to entirely discount the other possibility. Or the dream the Sacred Ancestor had. If the two different paths of evolution were combined, a new line might be born. In the same way, if our two potentials were mixed, it might lead to a third—to new possibilities. Toward that end, I need your blood."

"Is that why you returned?" D asked coolly. "I'll grant your desire. But you'll have to draw my blood with your own hand."

From the Hunter's back there was the sound of steel being unsheathed.

As if in response to his opponent's murderous intent, Gilzen braced his scepter for action.

"I've injected myself with alien blood," Gilzen said, striking his chest with his free hand. "You've been given the blood of a human. Which of these potentials best suits the universe? D, let us decide the matter once and for all! And with the blood that drains from your body, I shall search out new possibilities."

Gilzen's declaration reverberated, crushing down on the darkness.

Like So Much Dust

chapter 7

I

I'm exhausted. And scared. Please, let's just hide somewhere."

Lilia ignored Vera's glum appeal, having heard it scores of times before. She had even grown sick of threatening the woman. And it wasn't in her nature to soothe people's fears.

More than an hour ago, she'd told the doctor, "We'll be at our destination soon, so just wait a little longer." It was safe to say Vera had cause for grumbling. A number of times they'd encountered the castle's soldiers and monsters. All the soldiers had been slain, and they'd managed to make it past the monsters to get this far. Lilia no longer knew how far they'd walked, how many stairs they'd climbed, or how many times they'd changed moving sidewalks. She'd done well to make it this far with the doctor, who hadn't stopped shaking since Lourié had gone missing.

"Well, we're here. The Promised Land!" the Huntress said, taking Vera by the arm and giving a toss of her chin toward the door ahead of them.

"Where are we?"

"Gilzen's bedroom."

Vera reeled. Unable to regain her bearing, she was about to drop to her knees. Her fear and shock were so great she'd fainted.

Quickly catching Vera, the Huntress shook her violently. When the doctor managed to open her eyes, she told her, "The next time you shut your eyes, I'll bite you!" and revealed her fangs. They were the real thing.

Vera froze, but she didn't look away. Instead, her teeth chattered as she said, "What'll we do if Gilzen's in there? There'll be hell to pay!"

Was this the same brave doctor? Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"Wherever we go, there'll be hell to pay," Lilia replied. "Besides, this isn't Gilzen's *main* bedroom. It's just one of five other resting places he has. The owner's not home, and they say there's no better place for a burglar to hide than in the king's chambers!"

"But—"

"Enough! Come on! You're really pissing me off!"

She knew under normal circumstances she'd have long since abandoned the doctor. But she couldn't do that because of her

instructions from the gorgeous young man. Though she'd also been bitten by Gilzen, she'd barely come under his influence. The same should've been true for D. Yet whenever Lilia's eyes fixed on that gorgeous visage, his patinaed voice came back to her. The harder she tried to drive it away, the more vividly it came back. Lilia had the feeling she'd become a slave to his mysterious beauty, body and soul.

She checked the surveillance devices with an electronic sensor fastened to her belt. Even if the master of the house wasn't in, the defenses should still be active. The sensor informed her that the surveillance devices were not operating. It wasn't that she didn't find that strange, but Lilia was also thoroughly exhausted.

Having Vera wait there, she gave the door a determined push. It opened easily. The bedroom was so opulent it made Lilia's eyes bug. Naturally, there were no windows or mirrors. The bed was a golden coffin.

"That's odd."

She'd actually uttered the words this time.

Vera stiffened. "What . . . What is?"

"I don't know. I just sense something. This was probably a mistake. Let's get going."

"Huh?"

She turned to the doctor, who convulsed with fear—and then saw a shadowy figure standing by the door.

"Just perfect," Lilia muttered, weariness rising from the bottom of her heart.

The creature garbed in bizarre armor could only be an alien foe.

As she pushed Vera out of the way, Lilia simultaneously drew her longsword. The sword dashed out like the wind, batting away the iron arrow that was flying at her. Another came—and she instinctively dodged it. As she dived off to the right, she extended her left arm. The gas-powered arrow launcher that covered it from the elbow to the wrist sent an iron arrow at the alien's solar plexus. Though they weren't as heavy as the alien's, her arrows could reach supersonic speeds.

The alien's longsword flashed out, batting away one arrow, but a second one scored a direct hit. When the enormous figure dropped roughly to one knee, Lilia sailed through the air to attack with her sword. It parried, but too late; the power from the Noble blood Lilia had received drove both the parrying blade and her own into the alien's head. The alien howled.

"Gah!"

Covering her ears, Lilia reeled backward. The alien's cries had become supersonic waves that tortured her eardrums.

The instant she desperately planted her unsteady feet, Lilia was assailed by a horizontal slash. Gritting her teeth against the terrific pain, she felt dizzy as she made a panicky leap back. Her waist struck

something. The coffin! Her upper body arched back far, splayed across the coffin's lid. The enormous figure filled the Huntress's field of view. It was leaping toward her. She was in no position to dodge the longsword it had raised high.

Once again, dizziness dragged Lilia into darkness. Fighting it for her very life, she opened her eyes.

The cause of a second scream from the alien had left it hunching over her. The two of them were locked in a sort of embrace atop the coffin, but Lilia shoved it off for all she was worth. It rolled right off her without offering any resistance. A long spear jutted from its back.

The twitching body quickly grew still. After ten thousand years, death had come to take this visitor from another world.

Lilia looked at the Grim Reaper. Another figure stood in the doorway. Its gigantic form was identical to that of the recently deceased. Perhaps it was Gilzen's DNA in her blood that told her the figure's nature in a flash.

"Which kind are you? Plain old-fashioned alien? Or are you one of Gilzen's servants?" she asked as she felt the blood dripping from her midsection. The stench of blood pricked her nose.

"You are an intruder in Duke Gilzen's resting place," the featureless figure said. That gave her the answer.

"Hey, we're on the same side then, aren't we?" she said, pointing the tip of her sword at the foe on the floor.

Tilting its head a bit to one side, the new foe said, "On the same side? You are an enemy of Duke Gilzen."

"No, I'm totally under his control, you know? Say, where is Duke Gilzen now?"

A strange killing lust swelled from every inch of the alien. The crossbow on its back crept up toward its shoulder.

"Wait just a second. I'm on the same side you are!"

"On the same side?" it asked again, but its murderous intent didn't lessen.

"Yeah—look!"

Lilia lowered her scarf. It was unclear whether or not the alien looked at the teeth marks she exposed.

"Why have you come here?"

"I spotted this creep," Lilia said, looking down at the corpse. "Tailing it led me here. I think it must've noticed that this was Duke Gilzen's bedroom. It sure is a good thing you came along."

There was the whirr of what sounded like a motor, and the alien's crossbow changed its location. It pointed right at Lilia's heart.

"Just a sec—what's all this?"

"Those teeth marks aren't Duke Gilzen's."

"Oh, aren't you the observant one."

Lilia thought her blood would freeze solid. Given the speed of the

crossbow, there was no chance of dodging its arrow.

Her world darkened unexpectedly. Apparently the effects of the alien's scream still lingered. Staggering, the Huntress slumped against the coffin. Her left hand brushed something hard. If she were shot through the heart, would she still be able to counterattack? She wasn't sure that she could.

But no arrow was fired at her.

What in the—?

Her foe was shaken. A second later, her Huntress instincts told her why.

"What's the matter?" Lilia asked with feigned intimacy. "Go ahead and shoot already! That is, if you don't mind the off chance that you'll hit the coffin of your precious Duke Gilzen."

The alien didn't know what to say. The crossbow on its shoulder trembled, manifesting the alien's vacillation.

"If you don't say anything, I'm not going anywhere. Want to try and make me move?"

The alien's right hand went for the longsword on its hip. It quickly switched to the firearm on its left side. Removing that, too, the enormous figure stepped forward. It intended to get rid of Lilia with its bare hands. It headed right for her with broad strides. The floor quaked.

Just as the alien's gigantic form filled her field of view, Lilia shouted, "Come and get me!" Grabbing something with her left hand, she pulled it out and made a thrust straight ahead.

Though it tried to stop, the enormous form's inertia wouldn't allow it. The same long spear it'd driven through one of its own kind now pierced the pit of its owner's stomach. Thanks to the added weight and speed of the creature, it poked out through its back. Loosing an unholy cry, the alien arched backward.

Her ears already covered, Lilia dashed over to the doctor. Vera was slumped on the ground after hearing the supersonic waves. The enemy was still groaning. Lilia gave the woman a kick. She came around for a second, then fainted again.

"Oh, damn you!" the Huntress growled, grabbing Vera by the arm and standing her up. Still, the doctor was unsteady on her feet. Lilia threw her over her shoulder. The Huntress's wound screamed at her.

She ran for the door. The enemy was desperately trying to extract the spear. She didn't expect that blow to prove fatal. Sooner or later it would pull the thing out and come after them.

Lilia went through the doorway. She ran haphazardly down the corridor. Overhead, there was the sound of flapping wings closing on them from behind. Before she could lie flat on the floor, she felt impacts on her right shoulder and through Vera's body over her left. The doctor let out a scream.

When her body was hoisted into the air, Lilia didn't resist. To the

contrary, she found it a welcome change. The flying creatures were no doubt carrying prey back to their nest. While she couldn't exactly say this was preferable to doing battle with the alien, she'd also have had a hard time denying it. Also, it was easy.

They skimmed along just shy of the ceiling, and then suddenly the whole world opened up. Daylight and snowflakes surrounded them. A tremendous feeling of release coursed through the Huntress's body. They were outside! They'd soared all the way up to the castle's summit. Far off through the blustering snow, mountain peaks and the land around them came into view.

Suddenly they began to descend. The vast rooftop was drawing nearer. Atop it Lilia could make out a round nest fashioned from timbers and iron beams. Looking up at them were chicks—they were the size of human children, somewhere between a bird and a beast in appearance.

"Thanks for the ride!" Lilia exclaimed, changing to a backhanded grip on the sword in her right hand and jabbing backward with it decisively. Her thrust was instinctive, but it made contact. The bird let out a definite cry, then released the two of them.

They fell ten feet. Lilia had estimated the fall wouldn't be too bad. Fighting back the impact reverberating through her gut, she straightened herself up and broke into a run. Beside her, dark brown forms spread enormous wings as they took to the air. They'd smacked right into the nest. Even the weird chicks were trying to flee in confusion.

"Sorry," Lilia whispered, and then she dashed toward the opposite side of the roof. When she got there, she took Vera off her shoulder and sucked in a deep breath. Snowflakes blew at her.

"That feels good," she said, letting the truth slip out.

From down at her feet, she heard Vera whimper, "What happened? Where are we?"

"Up on the roof. It's okay, I think we've been saved."

"But the snow—we'll freeze!"

"You're a doctor, right? Why's dying the only thing you ever think about? We've got to keep moving toward life!"

Lilia spread her right hand. Squeezing the snow that accumulated on it, she made a small lump that she popped into her mouth. A chill spread through her, numbing her all the way up to her head.

"Proof that I'm alive."

Her muttered remark was inspired by a hazy gray shape she made out fifteen to twenty feet away. An exit hatch from the roof. After a bit of rest, all the women had to do was go down through it. Of course, if they rested too long, they'd turn into snowmen.

Lilia thought about eating another piece of snow. Squeezing it together, she brought it up to her mouth. Her hand halted. She didn't even feel the chill from the ball of snow against her lips.

The shape of the exit hatch had changed. Something stood in front of it. Something that spread its massive wings. Suddenly its wings flew off to the right. And with them went its long beak and body.

"Give me a break," Lilia murmured, because the thing that'd just thrown the bird out of the way was a creature that'd been brought here in its talons—reason told her that must be the case.

It had already freed itself from the long spear. Undoubtedly it would need little time to heal its wounds. Upright and proud, like a temple guardian, it walked toward Lilia with a gait that made it clear the creature brimmed with confidence and a desire for slaughter.

It was the alien loyal to Gilzen.

II

"What am I going to do?" Lilia murmured, and then she laughed. Perhaps at the rock bottom of despair, there was nothing left but laughter.

"It came . . . Came right after us, didn't it . . ."

Vera's words didn't even bother her.

"It's no use . . . We've had it . . . We'll be killed . . ."

"Yeah, probably. Just give up, okay?"

Lilia wasn't being snide. That seemed to be the natural answer.

This brought about a change in the situation. Vera suddenly stood up and started climbing across the castle wall. She was aided by old-fashioned loopholes for bows and guns. Putting her hands and feet into them, the doctor already had one leg over the edge by the time Lilia turned around.

"Is she *crazy*?" the Huntress muttered, putting her own feet into the loopholes and grabbing hold of the doctor's ankle with her outstretched hand. Just as her fingers stretched for another hold on Vera, she found herself leaning away from the wall, bent at the waist. Behind her, the alien had its longsword raised to strike. A cry rang out. There was the sound of something slashing through the wind, then sinking into the castle wall. Should Lilia have been happy to have dodged that fearsome blade, or scared because she'd now lost her balance?

The doctor and the Huntress plunged headlong down into a world where the blizzard danced wildly. The impact was surprisingly light, but deep. The pair had landed in the snow. Working their arms and legs like mad, they crawled back toward the surface. They were soon out.

Looking up at the castle, Lilia could see the roof about sixty feet above them. If all this snow hadn't slid off the back side of the roof and accumulated there, they probably would've been killed on impact.

“I can’t believe it. I wonder which one’s blood I have to thank for this?” the Huntress muttered to herself, and just then, Vera screamed right behind her.

“Coming from the castle—”

“*What?*”

Lilia turned her gaze back toward the castle, where she witnessed a puff of snow shooting up a few yards from them. She was at a loss for words. The swirling snow burst apart. It went without saying what emerged from the newest hole in the snow.

“That bastard just doesn’t give up!”

Lilia got to her feet, longsword in one hand.

It came at her from the right. She blocked its blow. The impact left her shaky. The blade the creature drew made a horizontal swipe at her torso. That, too, she parried, but she hadn’t managed to plant her feet. She was sent flying a good fifteen feet, where she sank into the snow.

“Vera!”

The enemy was closing on the doctor. Lilia pulled a knife from a sheath she wore on her right hip and tossed it. It landed right beside the doctor. Whether Vera noticed it or not was the question.

The enemy raised its longsword to strike. Unable to make a sound, the woman quaked, and her body blurred. It wasn’t due to the snow. Once again, the high-speed vibrations had come over Vera.

Before her foe, who grunted in confusion and hesitated for a moment, the woman returned to her normal form. Her eyes gleamed. These weren’t the eyes of a woman who could do nothing but cower. Her left hand reached into the snow beside her. Slipping under the enemy’s blade with perfect timing when it was thrust at her with deadly intent, Vera stabbed Lilia’s knife into her foe’s abdomen.

The enemy hunched forward. A blow with average human strength probably would’ve bounced off the alien’s armor. However, the high-speed vibrations had caused a change in the doctor, imbuing her slim arms with superhuman strength.

As Vera stepped away from her toppled foe, Lilia raced over to her. The deep snow caught at her feet. When she finally reached the doctor and took a position in front of her like a shield, her own knife sank into the snow before her. The enemy had recovered. Kicking up snow, it charged at them.

“Are you up for this?” Lilia asked.

“Of course!” Vera replied.

“Good!”

The two of them dove in opposite directions. The longsword that swung down between them cut ten feet into the snow. The weapon whipped around to the right. Lilia was the target. The alien had decided it would be best to get rid of her first, and it wasn’t mistaken on that count.

A black arrow flew out of nowhere. Unerringly true, it penetrated the alien's chest from behind. The enemy was normally on guard against sneak attacks, but these two women were overly formidable opponents. It couldn't afford to ignore them—and that had allowed an enemy behind it to make a move.

Lilia and Vera were equally surprised. They could've understood if that had happened inside the castle, but now they were outside. Who could've . . . ? Then they realized something. Before they'd reached the castle, someone had slain the mountain folk with arrows. Hadn't that been Lourié's father?

There were strident sounds. A second and third arrow had been batted down. At a distance that was impossible to judge due to the blizzard, Lilia was able to detect a hazy form.

Letting out a single groan, the enormous figure charged toward it. The sight of it struggling to pull one leg after another from the thigh-deep snow as it closed on its opponent was comical in spite of the alien's rage and murderous intent. When it had advanced thirty-five or forty feet, a figure popped up at the alien's feet and drove the long spear in his right hand up through the enormous creature's crotch. It was difficult to say whether the weapon penetrated the alien so deeply due to the strength of the spear or the force of its wielder. It had struck the enemy in a vital spot. The enormous figure trembled. Green blood poured down like a waterfall on the spear wielder.

On seeing that, the doctor shouted, "*Dust?*"

It was unclear to the women where he'd been or what he'd been doing. The bald bodyguard let go of what was apparently a homemade spear and tried to extricate himself from the snow. The snow collapsed. When the man stopped moving, this time the enemy thrust its blade deep into his chest. Dust arched backward. The sword blade rose for another thrust.

A gunshot rang out. The right half of the alien's face had been blown away.

Vera threw herself at the creature's legs. Reeling unsteadily, the enemy swung its blade around. Vera bent backward. The snow that fell on her back was stained red.

The gigantic figure advanced, moving right toward the doctor's cries.

Above the alien's head, a crimson flower sailed through the air. The instant her leap went into its descent, Lilia delivered the coup de grâce she was aiming for. Her blade came down with every ounce of her strength behind it—and her foe's head split all the way down to its chest. She put her weight behind the sword. In a single motion she split the creature all the way to the crotch. When she pulled her green-gore-spattered form up from the snow, the body of the foe she'd split vertically slowly spread down the middle, then flopped down in the white snow. It didn't move a muscle. The alien fiend had finally been

destroyed.

By the time Lilia had dashed over to them, both Dust and Vera were barely breathing. Lilia desperately fought back a sigh. To be killed so easily now—what had they been fighting for all this time, then?

"Sorry you had to see me . . . not quite at my most civilized," Vera suddenly whispered in a surprisingly steady tone.

"Don't say that—you only did what was right," Lilia said kindly. She couldn't even believe she was saying these words. Was it the influence of the young man's blood? Or was it just—

"How about . . . Dust?"

In a pained voice the village guard replied, "I'm still kicking, Vera—and thanks. For covering for me like that, I mean."

"The least I could do . . . by way of apology. I . . . Three years ago . . . I let your daughter . . . die."

"Don't talk!" Lilia told the woman as her eyes were drawn to the shadowy figure approaching from up ahead.

"It's okay . . . Let me say this . . . Three years ago . . . grade-school children from the village climbed the mountain . . . And I went along as the doctor . . ."

And then, a mountain tiger had attacked them. Although the teacher and bodyguards had fought the beast, a seven-year-old girl had lost her life.

"The girl . . . was killed right beside me . . . And I couldn't budge an inch . . . I was so scared . . . She was Dust's daughter!"

Lilia looked down.

"It's okay now . . . You protected me . . ." Dust said gently. As if those words were all he had to offer the dead.

Vera shook her head from side to side. Tears fell from her eyes.

"Lilia . . . the coward you saw . . . that was the real me . . . But I . . . I really didn't want to die . . . I still don't . . ."

"You were the brave little doctor, right up to the end," Lilia said, taking Vera's hand and giving it a shake. She could feel no throb of life in the cold hand.

"I want to live . . ." Vera said flatly. "To live . . . longer . . . And I want to treat . . . children in the village when they're sick . . . I'm the doctor . . ."

Her voice swiftly grew thin. The strength drained from her body.

"Vera . . ." Dust murmured. He gazed at Lilia. "I wanted to tell you this . . . but Vera and I . . . We were husband and wife . . . But when that happened to our daughter . . . we broke up . . ."

Lilia didn't say anything. The tragedy of three years earlier had dragged on, and here it would finally end. Dust shut his eyes. Taking his right hand, Lilia wrapped it around Vera's hand that she'd been holding.

"Goodbye," she said. There was nothing else to say.

But someone else had something to add. From beside Lilia, a voice

said, “It’s still too early for that!”

III

The instant their blades locked together, the Hunter felt that Gilzen’s strength surpassed his own. But D had greater speed. Parrying the Hunter’s blow, Gilzen put his weight behind his blade and forced it back through D, but the man in black broke free and made a slash at the Nobleman with ungodly speed. Gilzen groaned. Beneath his rent cape his clothes too were split open, and fresh blood spilled from him.

As if to crush that disgrace, Gilzen lashed out with his blade. Clangs rang out from steel on steel to the accompaniment of showers of sparks, and every time the figures in gold and black changed direction like the wind, their murderous intentions shifted as well.

“Urrh!”

With a cry that sounded like his abdomen was about to burst, Gilzen struck at the Hunter, and D parried. Gilzen smashed into the Hunter shoulder first. A normal human D could’ve easily deflected, but this was someone with the monstrous strength of a vampire—and D was knocked backward, impacting on a stone wall. As his body sank, he made a horizontal swipe of his sword. Having casually pressed forward, Gilzen found his right knee devastated, sending him reeling backward.

“Gaah!”

While he listened to a howl worthy of a beast, D also heard the grinding sound of sliding stonework behind him.

Gilzen smirked at him.

“Did you bump the door controls? Have a good look, D! See what the interior of my reactor is like.”

Not turning, D reached back with his left arm and held out the palm of his hand. Behind him was a white-hot river of slime. From an unknown source to an equally unknown destination, the goop that could only be described as boiling sludge coursed from right to left.

“This is no nuclear reactor!” Gilzen said. “Initially I used nuclear power from a light water reactor, but through torture I obtained the secrets of the aliens’ energy. D, this is the core of a galactic drive!”

It was a writhing, foamy river of white-hot slime that crept by, bubbles bursting—but D didn’t know whether or not it flowed all the way to the far side of the Milky Way. However, when the young man pulled his left hand back after no more than the span of a breath, his expression contained only a beautifully frightening air of the supernatural and nothingness.

“If you were to fall into it, you’d be banished to the ends of the

galaxy. What say you, D? Will you not calm yourself and aid me in my aims?"

D leapt into the air. As he avoided the blade being swung straight down at him, the Hunter also changed the angle of his own attack, and Gilzen rubbed his empty hand against his right cheek. Wiping up some of the blood that spilled from his deeply carved flesh, he put his fingers in his mouth and licked them.

"Just what I would expect from the Sacred Ancestor's sole success. When I first laid eyes on you, even I had to wonder if perhaps *he* had truly chosen the correct path."

The duke's eyes had begun to give off a terrible light. Blood light.

"Oh, my!" the hoarse voice said, sounding frightened. For a new air had begun to spill from Gilzen, one both unknown and unimaginable.

"However," Gilzen continued, "I regret that now. I'm forced to by the alien power that fills every inch of me. Look, D, at the wounds you dealt."

The Nobleman didn't need to tell him. D had seen with his own eyes how the wounds to Gilzen's abdomen and knee, as well as the one the Hunter had just left on his cheek, had all vanished without a trace. Even considering the Nobility's startling regenerative powers, such a recovery was impossible.

"Oh, how it fills me! The energy of another world, fostered on the far side of the universe. D, experience it and die!"

The Nobleman spun himself around as he swung his sword hard at the Hunter, but this was no longer the same Gilzen. Still poised to parry, D was sent flying backward a great distance. The blade didn't touch him, yet his black garb split open in a straight line. Not only that, but the Hunter's blood went flying as well.

As D landed, the hoarse voice said to him in a cramped tone, "Cut you in exactly the same place, didn't he?"

Before it had finished speaking, Gilzen charged forward with a deadly flurry of blows—D parried or dodged them, but was driven back to the brink of the boiling sludge.

"Have at you!"

Striking from a high position, the sword blade suddenly swished down low, shooting up from below in a scooping motion. Blood spouted from D's right knee. It had been a blow neither his fighting instincts nor his reflexes had been able to stop. As the Hunter staggered, heat struck his back.

"No place left to go!" Gilzen jeered. In his eyes, D was no longer an opponent. The Nobleman's eyes had the look of a huntsman who stands before a wounded beast. Confidence, frenzy, and murderous intent were there—and he raised his sword beside his head like a bat. And then he switched the blade to his left hand with unbelievable speed, to be driven straight down—right at Gilzen's feet.

The shadow cried out. It was a cry of agony to make anybody's hair stand on end.

"G-Gilzen . . ."

"Imagine finding you still lurking about, Mother," Gilzen said unpleasantly, never taking his eyes off D. His face had begun to depart from human lines, but expressions only a human face could wear surfaced on it, alternating between looks of love and hate. "Your son has become a new sort of Noble, fundamentally changing the very nature of the Nobility. All the old things are fated to be disposed of. That includes you, dear Mother."

The shadow's voice could no longer be heard. Gilzen stepped off to the side. A small shadow remained at his feet. It quivered two or three times, then moved no more.

"I've done away with my mother," Gilzen said proudly. "The one who held me back, the traitor who schemed to have me banished to the far reaches of the Frontier! D, don't even think of asking how I could do such a thing to my own mother."

Once more, the Noble raised his sword by the side of his head. D held his blade out straight in front of him, aligned with Gilzen's eye.

"I'll have your head, D. Know that the blood that drips from it will create a new chapter in the history of the Nobility."

The figure that charged forward was an enormous mass of energy. D didn't flee, but rather ran forward too. As they passed each other, the cutting sounds overlapped. When D turned to look back, his left arm was missing from the elbow down. However, Gilzen had slumped over badly.

"D . . ." he groaned, green blood flowing from his mouth. Then his head fell off—right into the stream of white sludge. When the splashes from the torso that followed it had subsided, D finally let the strength drain from his body and simply gazed at the sludge.

"He said that was the energy of the galactic drive," the hoarse voice murmured. "Will Gilzen's damned head and body be carried to the ends of the universe?"

D turned around. "I must thank you," he said in a low voice.

There was no one before him.

"Why didn't you hit me with a psychic attack?"

A voice issuing from nothing replied, "My aim from the beginning was the duke." The source of the voice had to be the man known as Budges.

The instant the two combatants had made their final exchange, Gilzen's movements had frozen in an unnatural manner, and in that heartbeat D's blade had flashed out.

"You've seen how the duke acted," Budges continued. "That's why I did it."

"And it never occurred to you to take *me* out while you were at it?"

"You left me no opening. Besides—"

"Yes?"

"I once had an audience with the Sacred Ancestor. He was so much like—"

The voice stopped there. D's eyes had given off blood light.

"Oh, those eyes . . . Just a glare from them makes even bodiless me feel like I'm being physically torn apart. Come to think of it . . . Could you really be . . . Could *your highness* be . . ."

Returning his blade to its sheath, D bent down and retrieved his left arm from where it lay at his feet. He lined up the wounds.

"What's this?" the hoarse voice cried out, and a tiny face surfaced in the palm of the Hunter's left hand. It furrowed what might've been its brow, or perhaps just more wrinkles.

The arm wouldn't fuse at the elbow.

"What the hell!"

"It's the way Gilzen cut me," D replied stoically. Anyone who didn't know the young man's true nature would've thought this exchange some sort of joke or parlor trick. "It'll reattach sooner or later. It's just that it may take a day, or a week, or a month."

"That ain't good. In the meantime, if you were to get—" The left hand suddenly held its tongue. It'd recalled the presence of the formless being. "At any rate," it continued, "Gilzen's been slain. Meaning your work should be finished. Let's get going."

"I have something to do first," D said, putting his left arm into an inner pocket of his long coat. "I heard that Jeanne had the child. Where are they?"

"Come with me," the formless voice told him.

Just as Gilzen had said, Lourié was in one of the castle's rooms with Jeanne. It was the infirmary. Jeanne continued to give makeshift medical care to the large number of wounded soldiers, while Lourié learned by watching her, and also pitched in.

"This child is more suited to doctoring than I!" Jeanne said proudly, rubbing the top of the boy's head. "So much so that I'd love to keep him here in the castle to focus on treating the injured. How would you like that?"

When she smiled at him, Lourié backed away. Her fangs frightened him.

"I'm joking. Go with him," she said, pushing the boy in D's direction. Jeanne then asked, "What do you intend to do about the castle?"

"I've done what I was hired to do," D said softly. "You can live here

or move somewhere else, whichever suits you. But if I'm asked to slay the lot of you, I will be back."

"It seems it would be best if we went back to sleep, wouldn't it?"

In response to Jeanne's remark, Budges said, "It certainly would. If we sleep for a million years, the world will probably change some more. Perhaps the time of the Nobility will have returned."

"Or maybe no one will even remember 'em."

Jeanne's eyes were riveted to the breast of D's long coat. As if in response to her scrutiny, whistling tinged with poorly feigned nonchalance rang out.

"Good point," Jeanne said in a weary tone. "No one would remember us. Maybe there wouldn't even be anyone left at all."

D turned without saying a word. The boy followed after him. The two of them went down the corridor without a backward glance. It was then that Lourié recalled something and proceeded to tell D all about it.

IV

The snow still swirled in savage confusion, turning the roof of the castle into a white peak. At the top of that mountain a diminutive form climbed through the snow to place a pair of small wooden plaques. Folding his hands together before the modest grave markers, Lourié recited a short and simple prayer before going back down the snowy incline to D. The snowstorm was returning the sparkle to the world. Dawn was near.

"That keeps my promise to Mr. Crey."

"I'm going down the mountain," the Hunter told the boy. "I don't have time to look for your father now, but I'm sure someone else will be coming up here."

The Nobles who'd returned to life wouldn't be left to their own devices. Humans were no longer powerless. Perhaps D envisioned the future destruction of the castle.

Lourié nodded. "I know. I'll come up again on my own. Besides, I get the feeling I know what I should do just from having been up here."

D gazed quietly at the rosy-cheeked boy. "When I visit the village again someday," he said, "I'll probably find a fine doctor here."

Sobbing a little, Lourié said, "But I'm not all that smart!"

Something that bordered on the miraculous occurred, though the boy probably didn't realize it. D extended his right hand and rubbed the boy's head.

"I don't know how smart you are, but you're brave," he said. It was a low and cold tone, yet still gentle. "Braver than anyone."

Lourié grinned. His little face was filled with pride. *I'll never forget this*, his expression declared. He'd never forget what he'd coaxed from the Hunter—he'd seen D's smile.

D turned toward the exit from the roof.

"Shall we go?"

"Sure."

The two of them walked back across the roof. After they'd advanced five or six paces, the door opened and a figure bounded out. It was Jeanne. Half her body was stained with fresh blood.

Seeing the two of them, she shouted, "The duke!"

Lourié froze.

"He took down Budges—run for it!"

From the crack in the door a stark light coursed out, piercing the warrior woman's heart from behind before stabbing into the ground at D's feet. It looked more like a long icicle than a spear. The exit from the roof burst outward. It wasn't an explosion. It'd been blown apart by internal pressure.

Deflecting the flying shrapnel with a single wave of his long coat, D gazed at the enormous golden figure who sailed down onto the roof. His landing made the roof shudder.

Standing there with an icicle gripped in his right hand and a longsword in his left was none other than Duke Gilzen. But how completely he'd changed! Every human feature of his face was warped, with a great chasm stretching from his right eye to his forehead. On the left side of his face the lips were pulled up higher, and the few teeth that remained in his mouth gave a sense less of idiocy and more of ghastly insanity. A twisted hand reached out toward D, and as the figure, badly stooped at the waist, pressed forward on similarly misshapen legs, he was more reminiscent of a spider than a human being.

Where had the galactic drive led Gilzen, and why had it brought him home?

"Back again, Gilzen?" D said, pushing Lourié toward a mound of snow and drawing his sword.

But wait, D! Right now, you lack the left hand that bolsters your regeneration. If you were to fall now, critically wounded, and that limb were carried off, God would be calling a certain gorgeous Hunter back to his reward.

Gilzen extended his icicle spear. Though it looked like ice, it was a collection of free-floating molecules from the air, coalesced into a long spear that was harder than iron. D knocked it away. His blade shattered.

Gilzen also had a sword. When the Nobleman made a diagonal swipe at D, the Hunter parried the sword with his right fist. Catching the blade between his index and middle fingers, he stopped it. As Gilzen was no ordinary Noble, but rather had become a fiend of the universe, it was truly an ungodly display of skill by the Hunter. However, look at how

the sword blade split the area between the fingers, slicing through D's hand almost to the wrist!

Gilzen hauled back with the icicle spear. D had no left hand with which to block it. Letting out a cry that might've been a curse on those who were cast out into the Milky Way, and that also seemed likely to drive all who heard it insane, Gilzen tried to thrust his spear forward.

Something happened. It was something to rival even the cosmic terror that lurked in the memory of the Milky Way—a miracle, even. Blood light shot from D's eyes—and it seared Gilzen's eyes and brain.

Still sunk in a snowbank, Lourié saw the thing that'd been Gilzen stagger and back away. As if frightened by some tremendously huge power.

D jumped clear, swinging his right hand sharply. Flying from it to pierce Gilzen's chest was the sword Gilzen had used to split D's right hand. As the giant grabbed it by the hilt and tried desperately to pull it out, D sprang at his chest. Gilzen instantly vanished. He'd used his ability to teleport. And it put him right behind D. However, D wasn't there. He, too, had vanished.

Gilzen suddenly stood stock still in astonishment—and D appeared right by his chest. The Hunter's bloodied hand seized the hilt that jutted from the Nobleman's chest, and D pushed with all his might. The blade of the sword protruded from the duke's back.

Gilzen's body was enveloped by purplish smoke. Within the smoke, a sort of mass began falling away in chunks. Chunks of skin. Of flesh. The disintegration of Duke Gilzen had begun.

"He's melting?" Lourié said, his eyes riveted—and with good reason. In its death throes, the enormous body let off countless jets of wildly dancing purple smoke, and when they touched the castle walls or floor, the stony material was instantly reduced to sludge.

"D—if the castle melts and the snow melts, the village will be flooded!" the boy wailed mournfully.

"D—D!" called out a voice that could only be Gilzen's. "Ah, D! I am undone. How did you slay me? The light in your eyes—was that, could it be, a power the Sacred Ancestor gave you? D, I didn't ultimately triumph over the Sacred Ancestor, did I? Please, tell me that's not sooo!"

His voice grew thin, and the giant collapsed. Purplish smoke enveloped his golden cape, dissolving it. It, and everything else.

D ran over to Lourié, tucked him under one arm, and raced for the castle wall.

"Shut your eyes—here we go!"

The two of them jumped.

On the same drift of snow where Lilia and Vera had previously landed, D lightly came to rest. He should've sunk down past his knees, but the snow didn't even come up to his ankles. It was a matter of the way D carried himself.

"D—the village!"

It was unclear what the Hunter made of Lourié's words, as he didn't so much as move an inch.

Shrouded in purple smoke up to its very zenith, the castle was swiftly vanishing like something out of a nightmare. As it collapsed, it touched the snowy slope where D and the boy stood—and at that instant, a dazzling light colored the world. Even D had to lower the brim of his traveler's hat, while Lourié was briefly blinded.

When the world finally began to etch itself into the boy's retinas again, he said, "The castle's *gone*?"

Gilzen's castle had vanished without a trace.

"And no avalanche or flood, either," D remarked.

He was right. The snowfield where the castle had stood had only collapsed a bit around the edges, but otherwise retained its original shape. The disappearance of the castle was like waking from a dream, and it had occurred without the need for any energy at all.

As he stood there dumbfounded, Lourié noticed that D had turned around and was facing the other way. The composed relief that filled the boy's heart at first allowed him to sense the presence of someone behind him. Could it be—

"Dad?"

Though snow continued to fall, there was no wind. Four figures stood behind a veil of white silk gauze. One of them stepped forward, taking on definite shape and color. It was Lilia. The boy stared at her, and then his gaze focused on the remaining three figures. Expectation, curiosity, and fear whirled in his eyes.

"Is my father there?"

"Could be," Lilia said, grinning thinly. "Haven't asked him his name, but I suppose the face bears some resemblance. No, that's probably just my imagination. D, those two in the back are Vera and Dust."

Not a word from the Hunter.

"The man the boy thinks is his father seems to have the same condition I do. While he was bitten by Gilzen, he didn't become a servant, but kept wandering outside the castle. He knew how he'd be treated if he were to go back among people, and more than that, he wasn't sure he could control his own actions. He says he doesn't remember when or how he came to be here. He also forgets whether or not he had any kids."

Lourié looked up at the Hunter. "Goodbye, D," he said.

D's hand closed on the boy's shoulder.

"It's okay, D," said a shadowy figure through the snow.

"The doctor . . ." Lourié began before calling out her name.

"Dust and I will guarantee the child's safety. We'd like Lourié here to —"

The boy swallowed hard.

"We were bitten by a man who came up the mountain with your father. But it's okay; we stopped at the victim stage. And neither Dust nor I have come under the control of that man."

"I don't believe that."

"Please, believe it. I have an idea, D: Come stay with us for three days. After that, we'll disappear into the mountains. If you think we're acting strangely—or any time you like—please go ahead and kill us."

"What'll you do in those three days?"

"Teach this child what I know," Vera said, her voice quavering with hope. "I can't go back to the village any longer. I'll live in the mountains with Dust. We know Gilzen's been destroyed, but we just can't go back to being human. Probably because of his alien blood. But it could be years before the next doctor comes to our village. In the meantime, this child will be their doctor. D, I was bitten by this man here, but he was bitten by Gilzen! Being a doctor, I was able to absorb the alien medical knowledge that Gilzen's blood carried. In three days, I'll be able to help the child master medical techniques unknown to mankind."

Snow struck D and the boy on the cheeks. The wind had begun to blow.

"Just three days, D. And someday he'll go to the Capital. When he does, the human race will begin to learn a new kind of medicine. At the hands of this child—won't that be wonderful?"

"Leave it to us, D," the figure who was apparently Dust said, nodding.

D's response came quickly. "What'll you do?" he asked Lourié.

The boy's decision was also swift. "I'm going with them," he said with a firm nod. He was a child of the Frontier, and though he was afraid, he still had hope and believed in himself.

"I think I'll keep you company."

The two of them started walking. Lourié turned and looked, raising one hand to the rooted Lilia.

"Goodbye, miss."

Waving back with a wry grin, Lilia could only watch through the gusting snow as the tall man's shadowy form faded from view.

"This isn't the end, you know," Lilia said, putting her right hand against the white scarf. "I'll thank you to remember who gave me one of these kisses. Someday, we'll meet again somewhere out on the Frontier. When we do, if I've become one of the Nobility, I'll die by your hand."

The Huntress's voice melted into the snow.

All the human shapes were swallowed up by the whiteness, and shortly thereafter the sole remaining figure turned around and buried herself in the snow that even now continued to fall.

the end

Postscript

I hear that in America, bookstores are on the brink of collapse. While it's not quite that bad in Japan, it's becoming increasingly common for a local bookstore that was open up until yesterday to be out of business today.

I live near a university—well, just one train station away from one—and to be honest, the scarcity of bookstores in the area makes me ask in disbelief, "Is this really a college town?" Three or four years ago, a big, three-story bookstore opened there. They had a great selection. The station was also nearby. In other words, they'd done everything right, but they quickly grew anxious. There were few customers. Bizarrely few. This university is rather well known because the children of a number of celebrities attend it. But even they must have to study. Granted, these days books can be purchased over the Internet, where there's an even larger selection than in bookstores and delivery can be much faster. However, the relationship between people (students in particular) and bookstores has more to it than just that. You go in looking for a particular book, and while you're milling around you spot another title that looks interesting and buy that instead. Or sometimes you just leave without buying anything at all. (*laughs*) I think that's the great thing about bookstores.

When I was little, there was a children's book about giant movie monsters with stills from 1933's *King Kong*, and just about every day I went into the neighborhood bookstore to stand there looking at them. At the appointed hour every day I'd vanish from my house, and then return again on the same schedule. Finding this behavior suspicious, my father had one of his employees from our family's restaurant tail me. Even now, I still recall how my heart beat faster as I stood in the corner of that bookstore, staring in endless fascination at the still of King Kong battling a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. And that's probably why I enjoyed visiting bookstores so much.

Even in this day and age, bookstores are "chests of unknown treasures." A world of things unknown to me are collected there, in pictures and words. Having stood in a store and read a book cover to cover without purchasing anything, I've been chastised by the shop owner, who said, "You ought to buy it," but even that didn't stop me from going to bookstores to hang around and read. Certainly Internet shopping is a way of making purchases that fits our busy modern

lifestyles, but it's unfortunate that thrilling times like those I spent in the corner of that bookstore furtively gazing at a treasure that was mine alone are gradually fading from the world.

However, there is hope. The Japanese consider books not just as printed matter but as art, according to the design, illustrations, binding, and size and style of font. There's a beauty that in itself demands to be acknowledged, to be purchased—that may not be the best path, but it's one the people of this country are all too happy to embrace. Of course, for books, the content is the most important thing. However, we believe *it's not the only thing*. While in one sense it's sad that we're losing all the small bookstores and are left with only the large chains, the fact that some bookstores are still healthy not only allows me to see and select books with my own two eyes, but also gives me a feeling of relief and bolsters my spirits.

May 1, 2014
While watching *30 Days of Night* (2007)
Hideyuki Kikuchi

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 23

Iriya the Berserker

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming December 2015
from Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

Beautiful Swordswoman

chapter 1

I

Although the sun should've been high at that hour, a shadow seemed to hang over the world. No one recalled it now, but long ago in the Far East there had been a style of ink painting called *sumi-e*. When heavenly skill inspired its brushstrokes as it did now, the vermilion boles of the twisted forests adorning a portion of the wilderness and the mounds of rubble nearly hidden behind their wall, as well as the graves of marble and gold that towered at the end of a winding road that almost seemed paved with crystal, all seemed stained with black and gray chaos, sealed away in it, and letting out an impossible scream.

In the motionless world of this picture the rain alone continued to fall, and even that would eventually surrender the impression of movement. And even that of sound, as well. It was the time when grays gently gave way to blacks. There was some question as to whether anyone could tell the hour at a time like this.

It was at just such an hour that a challenger appeared. A shape spread like a black stain in the incessant rain, and accompanied by the ringing of iron-shod hooves on the crystal road, it became a rider with black raiment fluttering behind him as he galloped along astride a black cyborg horse. At that point, a sound entered the world. It wasn't a shriek of fear from the inky tones at a horse and rider who were like darkness coalesced, but rather a feverish sigh—spilled at the sight of the gorgeous, pale countenance that drifted amid black garb fluttering like the wings of a supernatural bird.

Pounding through the silken threads of rain, the horse and rider passed through a gate into a graveyard where marble and gold joined in designs convoluted and grotesque.

From the gate alone it was evident the cemetery belonged to the Nobility, and though its interior should've been guarded by an electronic brain produced by the same science that'd built interplanetary spacecraft, the place had been left utterly devastated—actually, it was the sort of tableau favored by second-rate artists in the Capital who knew nothing of the Frontier. Grave markers and statues of natural stone that'd been exploded and burned by people from surrounding villages were almost unrecognizable, while lettering of inlaid gold and precious-jewel ornamentation had been pried from grave markers of indestructible metal, which despite all the violence and destructive force they'd seen still presented a lustrous and unblemished exterior to the storm. If the Nobles had so desired, they could've stopped even an army of humans numbering in the tens of thousands before it ever passed through the gates, so why they would allow trespassers to commit this destruction remained an eternal mystery.

The clan's graves lay to either side of the path. The truer their bloodline, the farther from the gate they were, and off in the distance was a great mausoleum that resembled a castle; the closer you came to it, the larger the other mausoleums and gravestones became.

Before long the rider reached the end of the path, where he dismounted without the slightest hesitation, wound the reins easily around the trunk of a nearby tree, and set off on foot toward a massive door. His boots were silent in each footfall, and droplets of water fell without pause from the edge of his wide-brimmed traveler's hat. The rider appeared to be in the habit of wearing it tilted slightly to the right.

After staring at the name inscribed on the surface of the door, the rider spread the fingers of his left hand and put its palm against the door.

"Here it comes!" a hoarse voice informed him. The surprising thing was, the voice came from between the palm of his hand and the door that lay before him. "It's not the viscount, though. It's a grave keeper," the voice continued. "And a pretty tough one at that!"

The rider pulled his hand away.

It was at that very moment that the door swung open with a groan. The shadowy form that burst from it slashed a sword down at the rider's head, but it was deflected with a mellifluous sound, and when the shadow landed on a gravestone across the path it took on human shape. Every bit as tall as the rider, the young man was shrouded in a green cape. His left hand was held far out in front of him with fingers spread, while his right had a sword held as far back as it possibly could. There was no opening in his defenses, nor would his deadly pose fail to exploit one in his opponent.

In response, the rider had his elegant longsword in one hand, extended at eye level with his foe. From the vicinity of his left hand, there escaped an almost-impressed remark. "Oh, now this is—"

At the same time, the young man in green took a deep breath, his shoulders alone moving.

"—just too perfect," the hoarse voice continued.

Was that to say here was a life and a skill too perfect to be taken by the blow to follow?

The rider's sword gradually began to rise. His right arm moved slightly to the side, and when it halted he'd taken the famous stance of a swordsman holding his blade up beside his head like a baseball bat. Everyone knew that pose was an invitation. However, when it came from this rider, his beauty made his foes' recognition that they were gambling their lives lose shape like a heat shimmer, luring his opponents in like moths to the flame. The grave keeper would be walking into a death trap.

The young man in green actually took a step forward. No, he advanced *two* paces. That he managed to stop there was a feat of

incredible willpower. Squeezing the fingers of his extended hand into a fist, he spread them once more. It was almost as if he were going to claw at his foe rather than slash at him. He stood that way for a second—two seconds—

"Not bad," the hoarse voice said. "Borrowed that trick from the Nobility, did he? However—"

A different voice finished that sentence.

"Please, allow me to have this battle."

It was the voice of a woman. And a young one, at that.

But neither of the two figures moved an inch, and the thread of murderous intent that bound them didn't slacken in the least.

"Pol."

Like a demon hearing a litany of prayer, the young man jumped, making a broad sweep with his left hand. A footlong blade concealed in his sleeve zipped at the source of the voice.

"D," she said, beginning a new appeal, "I don't want any compensation at all. Once I've slain him, I'll be on my way. I only ask that you please let me have this fight."

The eyes of the rider—D—shifted ever so slightly to the side, catching sight of the speaker.

The blade the young grave keeper had hurled hung in the air. It had been caught an inch or two shy of the woman's eye by a crimson hand. From the elbows all the way to the backs and palms of her hands she was covered by dazzling armor. There in the silvery curtains of endless rain, she alone called to mind a burning flame given human form. A crimson cape was closed over the woman's chest, and her pale face was slightly downturned. Glowing red hair hung down to her waist, concealing the left half of her face. The clasp on her cape was a gold chain. Pieces of chain were also sewn here and there to her cape in no particular pattern, lending the worn and dirty fabric a certain charm.

"My name's Iriya. I'm a Hunter."

You could tell the prowess of a Hunter by the tone of their voice, the look in their eye, and the way they carried themselves. What did D make of her?

When he stepped forward without a word, Iriya played her final card, saying, "He's my younger brother."

D halted, his dark eyes reflecting her pale face before quickly shifting to the young man. "You get one minute," a voice of iron informed her.

"You have my thanks."

The woman's right hand slipped under her cape.

What weapon did she have, and how did she use it? All her opponent's speculation on these accounts would be frustrated.

"Pol!" the woman called out again.

Blackness covered her face. The young man had shifted his left hand, which he still held outstretched. The shadow of his palm and five fingers

covered the woman's face, robbing her of her sight. The eyes of the woman—Iriya—were locked in darkness. Not only that, but even the scenery around her darkened. D's black garb, the gravestones, the trees, and the reflected light were all lost, each and every one of them sinking into darkness.

"He's good," said a hoarse voice that no one would ever mistake for D's, though it certainly seemed to come from his location.

Ahead of the Hunter in a particularly dense patch of darkness there burned the sort of animosity that would make anyone want to turn their face away.

"My, my, my," the hoarse voice said snidely. "There are two presences. Only one of 'em is all fired up, though. And that darkness—it's special, absorbing all signs of people, sounds, even movements of the air! He could be standing right in front of you and you'd never even know it till he stabbed you."

Even as it said that, the hoarse voice moved in a new direction—shifting a bit to the left.

"Nice!" the hoarse voice said.

At that moment, what had happened in the depths of that impenetrable darkness?

"It's over."

Before the hoarse voice could even say that, the surrounding darkness was retreating as if it'd just remembered it didn't belong there. And in the twilit ruins D and the young grave keeper who'd been left a corpse came back into view, as well as the warrior woman who lingered by the body.

"Looks like someone might be dumb enough to shout for joy," the hoarse voice remarked with a ring of melancholy.

As the lovely woman looked down at the motionless form of her brother, there wasn't a hint of sadness about her.

"I suppose that's one way of winning. The wine from the victory cup must taste mighty bitter, though."

The beauty—Iriya—murmured something. Undoubtedly it was the words to a prayer. Once the corpse at her feet had turned to dust, Iriya returned her blade to its sheath. The almost imperceptible wind carried the dust away. Before long, only the young grave keeper's clothes remained there, and that was when Iriya came over to D. No tears had left their tracks on her pale visage.

"Thank you. With your cooperation, I was able to send my brother back to God."

Saying that alone, Iriya shifted her eyes from D's face to his left hip. For she'd heard the hoarse voice pensively muttering, "To God, eh?"

"Do you believe in God?" D asked.

Iriya nodded. "If I didn't, I couldn't go on living."

Perhaps it wouldn't have mattered what she replied. The figure of

beauty in black walked back the way he'd come without so much as a nod.

"The hair!" she called out to him.

When Nobles turned to dust, the only part they left behind was hair, and that was used to confirm their identity. The person who brought it in would be paid the reward, regardless of who they might be.

As she followed fast behind D, Iriya said, "This is for you, for letting me fight in your place. Please, take it."

"You're the one who did the work," D replied without even halting.

"That won't sit quite right with me. Take it, please," Iriya continued doggedly.

Suddenly, D asked her, "And if I said no, what would you do?"

"What?"

"Would you resort to force?"

This young man wasn't the sort to distinguish between men and women when it came to armed opponents, but this time his actions were a little out of the ordinary.

Tension surged into Iriya's expression, and half of it still remained there as the beauty declared, "You're on."

At her carefree declaration, a cry of "Wow!" rose from the vicinity of D's left hip. His lips hadn't moved a bit.

"So," she continued, "how do we play this?"

Her expression calm and with a hint of what could be called daring, the warrior woman was ready to accept D's challenge.

II

The air whistled. But to be precise, just before that sound Iriya had leapt out of the sword's way.

As she jumped a good ten feet, Iriya hurled the dagger from her hip with an underhanded scooping motion. Her dagger, sheathed with its hilt pointed down, had split in two down the middle the instant it'd been pulled from its scabbard.

There was a beautiful sound. As she landed, Iriya pressed the palms of her hands together in front of her chest. The handle of the dagger jutted from between them. D had batted the dagger away with his blade, and Iriya had stopped it cold.

Just as Iriya was about to reach for the sword on her hip with her right hand, the figure in black sailed over her head. Was he an angel or the Grim Reaper? The only thing that was certain was that his beauty was unearthly. There wasn't so much as a hint of mercy in the stark glint slashing down at her. Iriya couldn't even draw her sword.

Sparks flew. Right in front of Iriya was a visage so gorgeous a good look at it seemed likely to leave her in a stupor, and D narrowed his eyes ever so slightly—and backed off. Her eardrums pounded with the sound made when she'd parried D's blade. The impact she'd felt through the dagger not only numbed her left arm from the wrist down, but the loss of feeling extended all the way up to the shoulder. Nevertheless, Iriya was reaching for the hilt of her sword with her right hand.

"That's far enough," the hoarse voice said. "Well, not bad for a woman. You made it through three of *this guy's* attacks. Outstanding."

Waiting a while after confirming that D had sheathed his blade, Iriya then took her hand away from her own hilt. She'd judged from the air about D that he had no intention of attacking again. She didn't know what the result had been. Apparently this young man had the ability to erase all traces of even his ordinary presence the instant hostilities ceased. Was he a beautiful nothingness made solid? If he closed on someone while keeping his footfalls silent, they'd never notice till he'd run them through the heart.

"So, you'll accept it then, won't you?" Iriya asked, sweat rolling down her cheeks.

"Sure."

"Good," Iriya said with a carefree smile. "I'm sure my brother would be satisfied with his reward being paid to the world-renowned D. You have my thanks."

And then she walked over to the dusty remains of the grave keeper, bent down, and grabbed a handful of hair before straightening up again. Handing it to D, she went back to the remains, put her left fist over the right side of her chest, and took a prayerful pose. The almost nonexistent evening breeze tossed her hair and the hem of the blazing red cape.

Ordinarily, D focused solely on his own activities, regardless of who else might be there or what their situation might be. In this case, he had to deal the coup de grâce to the Noble who slumbered in that mausoleum. However, at some point the sense of incongruity that wafted about the warrior woman with whom he'd done battle had suspended that course of action.

Before long, the girl turned in D's direction. In the faint remaining light of day, the shadow of her hair stretched long and far across the ground. It no longer had the color of flame.

"The man they call D doesn't need any help, I suppose?" she said, her expression composed and no sign of tears anywhere.

After watching the figure in crimson walk off a short distance to where her cyborg horse waited, D then turned toward the grave. A faint groan had reached his ears.

"Oh, it seems that rascal the viscount knows what we've got in store for him! He's moaning about how he doesn't want to die. Shouting at us

to stay back."

As the figure in black walked forward, the voice from the vicinity of his left hip continued, "But what I don't get is that girl just now. She's got the skill of a Hunter for sure, but what's with her acting so cool and collected? That was her own brother she cut down! And she didn't shed a single tear over it. Still, she doesn't look cold blooded. The way she acted toward you, it was like she was just a plain ol' farm girl dressed up for a costume party. Don't see a lot of that type these days."

"She gained something," D fairly muttered. "She must've, for an ordinary girl to become a Hunter. But in exchange—"

"—she must've lost something, too, right?" the hoarse voice said, finishing the Hunter's thought. "What that something was—does that interest you?"

D didn't answer. If a million people knew him, every last one of them probably would reply that he had no interest at all in that topic. And they'd assert in unison that he'd never say so.

Passing through the entrance to the burial place, D vanished. Groans became sobs of fear, then the breathless huffing of the terrorized. And then—the screams of someone in their death throes.

Five days later, D was in Silver Strings Town. He was there to turn over a sample of the Noble's DNA to the local sheriff and to collect the reward.

"Nice little payday for you, isn't it?" the sheriff said venomously as D stuffed a thick wad of bills into his coat.

"We can trade places if you'd like."

The sheriff shuddered, saying, "Don't even joke about that. I'm happy just being the law in a hick town. They don't pay me enough to take on the Nobility. It's just—" He seemed to grow reflective, rubbing one arm before he continued, "I never thought I'd meet someone so good looking it made my hair stand on end. We've got hot springs here in town. What say you go have yourself a soak?"

"That's real neighborly of you."

The Hunter's voice had changed so radically the sheriff could only stand there rooted and amazed as the young man in black walked toward the door.

"Between you and the woman who came in yesterday, I'd say Hunters these days are a pretty odd bunch."

"A woman?" the hoarse voice inquired.

"Yep. Only she wasn't cashing in on no Noble. It was a pair of thugs

who'd jumped her. After putting 'em down, she finds out they're outlaws with prices on their heads, you see. But that woman—actually, *girl* is closer to the truth—she really doesn't look like the kind to be working as a Hunter. Sure is pretty, but she just seems like the kind of average folk you'd run into anywhere, and—"

"What's her name?" the Hunter asked as he stood in the doorway, his back still to the lawman.

Knitting his brow a bit, the sheriff shortly replied, "I'm pretty sure it was Iriya. Say, are you a ventriloquist or something?"

Giving no reply, the Hunter stepped outside, where the hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hip said, "Strange connection we've got here. Imagine meeting her here, of all places."

"Does that interest you?" D asked in his own voice.

The hoarse voice cleared its throat, replying in a not-on-your-life tone, "Well, putting that aside for the time being, the sheriff did say something about a hot spring, didn't he? Seems the waters have all kinds of stuff that does a body good. So long as it's not running water, you should probably suck it up and give it a try. What do you say we go for a dip?"

D's cyborg horse was tethered to a fence on the opposite side of the street. As he was crossing it, a trio of men coming from his left brushed past him.

"Hey!" the leftmost man shouted menacingly. "The corner of your coat hit me! Ain't you got nothing to say about that?"

"Sorry, pal," said a hoarse voice that didn't sound like it belonged to the Hunter at all, but there was no mistaking the utter contempt in its tone.

"Are you screwing with us, you bastard?" the same man shouted, and all three of them surrounded D.

"Hey, mister—you don't mind this, do you?" another said as he reached for D's chest.

A heartbeat later the man's wrist broke noisily, and as he was being flipped over, his elbow shattered. Since he hit the ground headfirst, he suffered a horrendous concussion as well as having a cervical vertebra dislocated.

The expressions of the other two changed, and as they shouted curses and reached for the swords on their hips, the hoarse voice said simply, "You're gonna die," and froze them on the spot.

The hot spring in question was on the east end of town, and it was shrouded in steam. Thanks to the patrons of hot springs who came from

other regions on hearing its praises, as well as to the money those people spent there, Silver Strings Town enjoyed a high standard of living that was rare in the Frontier sectors. Many paid for admission to the baths with goods such as colossal vegetables or synthesized beef, to the point where those running the establishments had to hire wagons six times a year to haul the bounty off to the food distribution center.

The springs were divided into a total of thirty-six different therapeutic baths, large and small: the public baths, the more curative medicinal baths, and the healing baths, where you could see the effects firsthand. The medicinal baths were three times as expensive as the public ones, while the healing baths charged ten times as much.

Some establishments had a common entrance for all three kinds of bath, while others kept separate entrances, and in early afternoon, while the sun was still high, the girl rode her cyborg horse to the healing baths. The carriages, cars, and wheelchairs of the seriously injured or the infirm usually were lined up at the exclusive entrance regardless of the cost, but today carriages were few and far between, so the girl didn't have to wait before paying twice the healing baths' normal fee to the staff, who eyed her crimson garb with wonder, then requesting a private bathing area.

The path of stones and concrete was covered with droplets of condensation. Light spilling in through windows nearly thirty feet up cast dappled patterns on the floor. The girl's feet marched right through them.

Iron doors came into view, set into the wall to either side of her. Occurring at intervals of about thirty feet, they stretched on seemingly forever. The number the receptionist had given the girl was 49.

It took her seven minutes to reach the door with that number plate. Turning a brass knob, she heard the sound of the lock disengaging. A changing room that looked to be ten paces square appeared before her. The private hot spring the girl had requested was actually one intended for multiple occupants. She probably wanted ample space to relax alone.

Placing the last of her clothes into a cubbyhole in the wall, the girl slid open a glass door and entered the bathing area.

The vast bathing area was easily twice as large as the changing room, a rustic-looking place where natural black stone had been dissolved and mixed with concrete before being sprayed on the walls and floors, while steam and pools of milky-white therapeutic waters filled the room.

The girl was stark naked, carrying not so much as a hand towel. Without even a dagger for defense, her unguarded and glorious nakedness made her look like an ordinary hot-springs patron instead of suggesting any connection to her line of work.

The bath was divided into a number of pools, each with a sign posted on the wall.

Internal ailments: 3–5 dips of 5 minutes each. Drink no more than 1 teaspoon.

External injuries and skin conditions: 5 minutes or less.

External injuries and muscular problems: 10 minutes or less.

External injuries and internal-organ problems: 5 minutes or less.

External injuries and skeletal problems: 2 minutes or less.

The girl selected the one labeled "muscular problems" and immersed herself in the warm water. According to the sign's brief description, the waters treated not only muscle aches, but also cuts and scrapes. The posted limit of ten minutes was how long it should take for a complete recovery, and at the same time stated that it would be dangerous to stay in the bath beyond that point.

With her eyes closed, her face took on an expression just as peaceful as that of any other hot springs patron.

Before two minutes had passed, the glass door slid open and dark figures charged in, plowing through the white steam with an air of murderous intent. Four men gazed down at the pool.

The girl opened her eyes, took a look at their vicious scowls, and quickly closed them again. Her expression had become one of terrible boredom.

"And what might I be able to do for you?"

Her greeting was so reasonable—and in this case, entirely unexpected—that the men fell silent for a moment and exchanged glances before their lips twisted into grins.

A rough-looking giant of a man who had to be their leader said, "Sorry to barge in on you during your bath, though it's doing wonders for our eyes!" Licking his lips, he continued, "And for our wallets, too. We'd love to drag you outta there and really stick it to you, but we were hired to take you down right where you are. You can soak there in your own blood!"

III

All of the men had weapons. When the leader tossed his chin, the man to his right tightened his grip on a short spear. The others remained empty handed, either out of complete confidence in the skill of the first man, or because their target—Iriya—looked like nothing more than an ordinary girl scared out of her wits.

In the bath, Iriya pushed off with her hands and feet, retreating to

the far end of the little pool. Perhaps that only stoked his bullying nature, because the face of the man with the spear was warped by naked lust as he gripped the weapon as if it were a harpoon. He intended to throw it and finish her off.

But a stunned look spread across his face. Iriya's head had unexpectedly arched back, and she'd submerged in the warm water. The milky-white bathwater didn't allow the killers so much as a blurry glimpse of her form.

"Damn it!" the man groaned, and the spear left his hands. Although he'd just made a diagonal thrust at where he believed the girl's chest to be, his spear had simply kept on going.

"That bitch!"

Drawing the machete from his hip, the spearman leapt into the bath. The water was only thigh deep. As he kicked his way through the water willy-nilly, to his rear the leader called out to him, "Watch yourself!"

At that instant, the spear was thrust up from below the man, its head piercing him through the pit of his stomach and poking clear out through his back. His death rattle was like the cry of a wild animal.

Though staggering, the man didn't fall, but rather grabbed hold of the spear and pulled it free, throwing both it and the machete he held down at his compatriots' feet before smiling broadly and collapsing through a mountain of steam. The bathwater that splashed up was stained red.

"She ain't got a weapon!" the leader shouted. "But don't go in there. We wait till she comes up. She'll be outta breath soon enough. You—bow!"

The man he'd addressed already had his bowstring taut, and he let his arrow fly at the water's surface. The other two had longswords drawn. They'd seen that what looked to be an ordinary girl was the exact opposite.

Five seconds . . . Ten . . . Twenty . . . The time that slipped past felt both long and short to those gambling their lives.

"Any second now," the leader groaned, and at that moment two things happened simultaneously. There was the sound of the bathwater churning that made the men stand ready, and the sound of the glass door sliding open.

"Go!" the leader bellowed, pushing the compatriots who flanked him toward the bath before he turned around.

The approaching figure in black was so gorgeous, the very steam that clung to him seemed to glow.

"You ain't Nazlo—who *are* you?"

Both the voice that shouted those words and the sword the man held ready trembled at the unearthly air of the approaching figure. The leader didn't even seem to notice when terrific screams echoed from over by the bath.

"We want to hear about Viscount Kraken—so leave one alive."

All the leader heard were those frank but disturbing words. No matter who it was he now faced, the fact that this person knew the viscount's name meant that he definitely needed to meet his end.

Bracing his broadsword by his hip, the leader shouted, "Kill 'im!" and charged toward the figure, wildly waving his steel all the while.

There were three of them, and they were certain their blades fell on the figure first, yet to their great frustration they slashed only empty space. A flash of light shot out between them—and two heads sailed through the air. The vivid vermilion stains didn't spread through the steam and across the floor until after the pair of heads had sunk into the waters of a distant bath.

Still gripping his sword, the leader was rooted between the two corpses. While the sword tip in front of his chest had been thrust at him with ungodly speed, it was the beauty before him that robbed him of his soul. The beauty of a youthful face, with a traveler's hat down low over the eyes.

"D!"

Though the young man heard that cry from the bath, he didn't turn in its direction. Rather, it was the leader who reacted.

"D . . ." he muttered like a demented soul, sinking as his legs turned to jelly.

He knew the name D. The knowledge was gleaned from rumors ghastly enough to take the legs right out from under the man.

"You saved me," the girl said. "But what are you doing here?"

"I just finished mopping up three hoods, and when they were begging for their lives, an interesting name came up," the hoarse voice said from the vicinity of D's left hip. "Anyway, the idle chitchat will keep till later. You sure are stacked, aren't you?"

"*What?*" she cried, and there was the sound of something slapped over flesh and an intense feeling of misgivings.

"And here you thought I couldn't see you through all this steam? In your dreams! But I don't suppose you feel much like soaking in bloodied bathwater. Hurry up and get some clothes on. Don't worry, I'll keep my eyes shut, and *this guy* doesn't have a shred of interest in naked ladies."

"You sure you won't look?"

"Of course. You have my word as a gentleman."

Even when there was the sound of wet feet stepping out of the bath and pattering right past him, D made no attempt to turn.

"Where's Viscount Kraken?" he inquired.

The tip of his sword was right under the nose of the slumped leader.

"I don't know . . . Who are you talking about?"

"The Noble who ordered the lot of you to kill that girl just now."

The Hunter's voice had suddenly turned hoarse. The leader's eyes bugged out.

"Did you leave three of your flunkies behind and collect some new help on account of you'd heard how tough she was? But when just a few of you went into the ladies' bath for a peek, you were jumping the gun. What—did you think because she was a woman it'd be easy? No matter, when you're out looking for help, you might want to choose people who watch what they say. Of course, *they* aren't saying anything anymore."

The leader's face went white as a sheet. He realized what had happened to the three men he'd sent to town.

"See, just before their heads flew, they said you were the only one who knew where to find Viscount Kraken. Well, I suppose it was better than having an arm and a leg hacked off."

"I don't know . . . I don't know nothing . . ." the leader said, shaking his head. It wobbled from side to side as if he were drunk. Perhaps the scent of death had left his spirit besotted.

There was no sound as the Hunter's blade glinted. It only appeared to be a single flash of steel, yet both the leader's ears went flying. Squealing, he pressed the palms of his hands to the sides of his head, and from beneath them thick redness spilled.

"I'll lop off your left arm next."

The hoarse voice's dispassionate announcement turned the leader's body to cold stone. Nevertheless, he continued to say he didn't know anything.

"I guess it's no use, then. He'd rather die than talk. Time to chalk up another pointless death and pull out of here?"

Once again, the hoarse voice turned the leader into a corpse.

"Please, wait!" a voice called from behind the Hunter. Now dressed, Iriya ran over to stand beside D. "It was me Viscount Kraken was gunning for, right?" she said. "Good—that means Churos must be there after all!"

D's eyes slowly bored into Iriya's face.

"You said 'there,' didn't you? You know where he is?"

"Kraken's castle and grave both moved two thousand years ago. Now he has a wandering fortress that prowls the water's edge out on the Frontier."

The fact that both these voices apparently belonged to D left Iriya's head spinning.

"I heard something in the town of Semdonen from a traveling merchant. He said that when he'd passed through Daskankirul Gorge, in an area that'd only been hydrogen sulfide swamps before, he'd seen a gigantic, towering structure that looked like some kind of Noble's castle. He saw that six months ago, and I heard it from him a month back."

"Sad to say, but if you're talking about Daskankirul, I passed through there on the way here. There was nothing there," the hoarse voice said with regret, and then it said to the leader, "Hey, are you gonna come clean with us or what?"

The leader turned away in a snit.

D's eyes gleamed. In them, the leader's body grew thin, as if he'd been wrung dry. That's what happened to humans who felt the approach of death.

"Please, wait," Iriya said to stop him.

"You feeling pity, missy?" the hoarse voice asked teasingly.

"No."

Circling around behind the leader, Iriya grabbed both his shoulders. Planting her knee in the center of his back, she pushed with it at the same time she pulled against his shoulders. The leader let out a deep breath.

"Now you'll be able to fight, okay?"

The leader's expression instantly became one of relief—and of surprise. Looking back over his shoulder at Iriya, he said, "You're strange for a Hunter, you know that? I don't mean to talk out of turn, but you should get outta that line and do something upstanding. You'll make someone a real good bride. And for the record, Kraken's castle has moved to Wendoba Ravine now."

Iriya's mouth dropped open. Putting her fist over it, she said, "Thank you."

The leader stood up. He was no longer trembling. When he raised his broadsword high and dashed straight for D, Iriya shut her eyes.